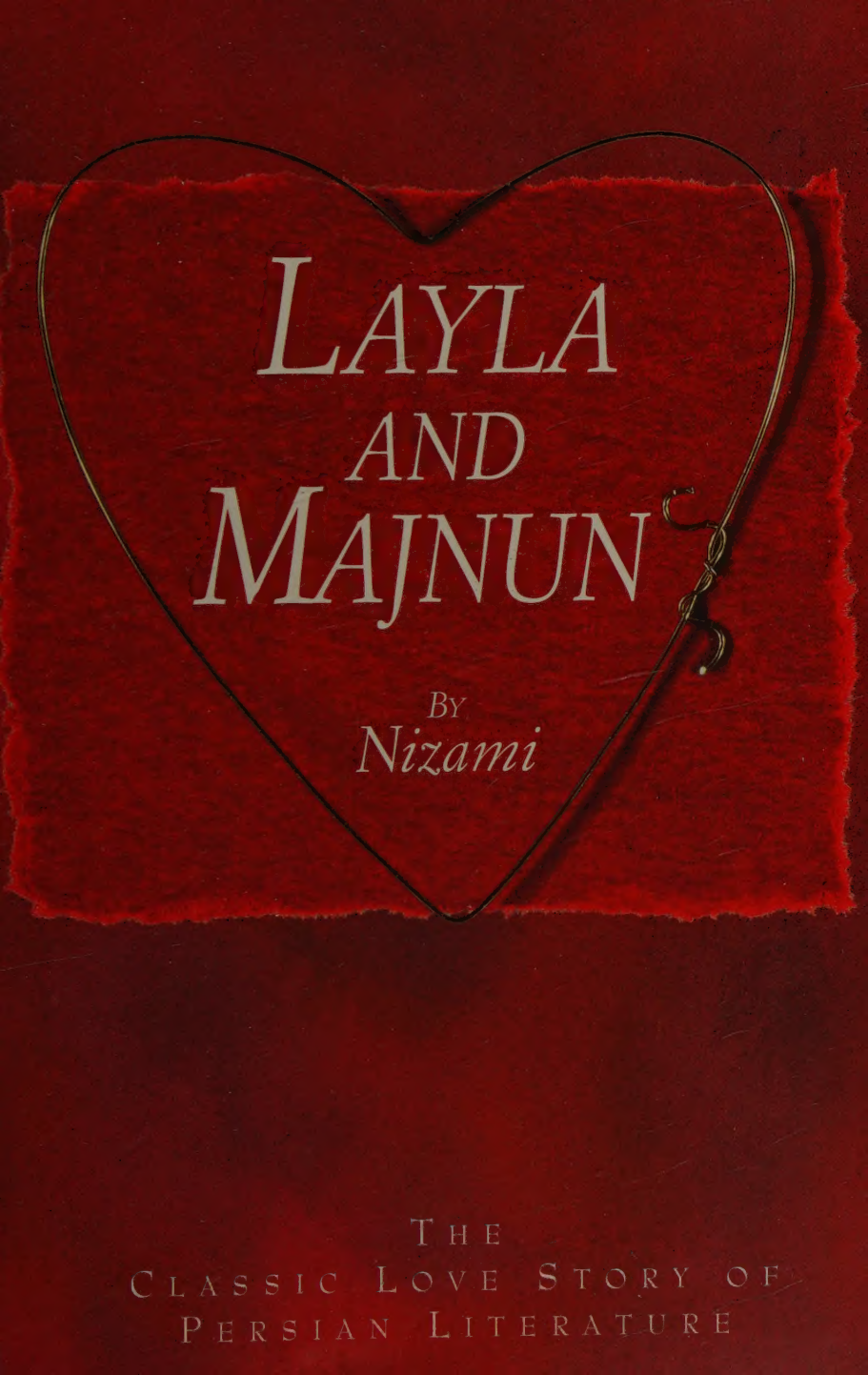
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The language of the original poem may be that of twelfth century Persia, but his theme is one which transcends all barriers of time and space.

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LAYLA AND MAJNUN

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BY

NIZAMI

PROSE ADAPTATION BY
COLIN TURNER

BLAKE

Published by Blake Publishing Ltd, 3 Bramber Court,
2 Bramber Road, London W14 9PB, England

First published in Great Britain 1997

ISBN 1 85782 1610

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data:
A catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library.

Typeset by BCP

Printed in Finland by WSOY

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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To Mahshid, with love

Layla

by Eric Clapton

What will you do when you get lonely
No one waiting by your side?
You've been running and hiding much too long;
You know it's just your foolish pride.

Layla, got me on my knees. Layla
I'm begging, darling, please. Layla
Darling, won't you ease my worried mind?

Tried to give you consolation;
Your old man had let you down.
Like a fool, I fell in love with you;
You turned my whole world upside down.

Layla...

Make the best of the situation
Before I finally go insane.
Please don't say we'll never find a way
Tell me all my love's in vain.

Layla...

Foreword

More has been written about love than about any other area of human experience. Since we first began to commit our ideas and feelings to paper, writers the world over have waxed lyrical about the joys of love, and about the sorrows of love unrequited.

Arguably the most popular story in the Islamic world is *Layla and Majnun*. For well over a thousand years, versions of this tragic tale have appeared in prose, poetry and song in almost every language in the Islamic Near East, yet it is Nizami's epic poem which still serves as the basis for all others.

The Persian poet Nizami was commissioned to write *Layla and Majnun* by the Caucasian ruler, Shirvanshah, in AD1188. In his original preface to the poem, Nizami explains that a messenger from Shirvanshah arrived and gave him a letter written in the King's own hand. Extolling Nizami as 'the universal magician of eloquence', Shirvanshah asked the poet to write a romantic epic based on a simple Arab folk-tale: the age-old tale of Majnun, the 'love-mad' poet, and Layla, the celebrated desert beauty.

Since the dawn of Islam some five hundred years

before, the legend of Layla and Majnun had been a popular theme of the love songs, sonnets and odes of the Bedouins in Arabia. Majnun was associated with a real-life character, Qays ibn al-Mulawwah, who probably lived in the second half of the seventh century AD in the desert of Najd in the Arabian peninsula. By Nizami's time there were many variations on the Majnun theme circulating throughout the region, and no doubt Shirvanshah approached Nizami with a view to the creation of something 'special'.

Initially, Nizami was loathe to accept the commission, as he felt the story offered 'neither gardens nor royal pageants nor festivities, neither streams nor wines nor happiness', all of which are staples of classical Persian poetry. But eventually, at his son's insistence, he relented. Less than four months later, Nizami's *Layla and Majnun*, which comprises in the original some 8,000 lines of verse, was completed.

In writing *Layla and Majnun*, there is little doubt that Nizami uses all the material — both written and oral — that was available to him. He preserved the Bedouin atmosphere of the original tale while at the same time placing the story into the far more civilised Persian world of his time, embellishing the tale with the rich colours and imagery of his own native language and literary tradition.

Nizami did indeed create something special for his patron, Shirvanshah. This striking originality lies in his masterful psychological portrayal of the complexity of human emotions when faced with 'love that knows no laws'. The lightness of heart that falling in love can

bring; the thrill of mutual affection; the sorrows of separation; the pains of doubt and jealousy; the bitterness of love betrayed; the grief that comes with loss — Nizami maps the whole of the mysterious world of love, leaving no region uncharted. His language may be the language of twelfth-century Persia, but his theme is one which transcends all barriers of time and space.

Dr Colin Paul Turner,
Durham University

Chapter 1

Only man can know the pain
of having something he does not need,
while needing something he does not have ...

In Arabia of old there once lived such a man — a great Lord, a Sayyid, who ruled over the tribe known as the Banu Amir. No other dominion matched his in prosperity and success, and his prowess as a leader of men was acknowledged throughout the land. To the poor, he was generosity itself — the doors of his vast treasury were always open, the strings of his purse always untied. And his hospitality towards strangers was legendary. Yet, although he was loved by his people and enjoyed the kind of respect usually reserved for sultans and caliphs, he saw his own situation in a different light. To his own mind, he resembled a candle, slowly consuming itself without spreading enough light for others. One great and ever-present sorrow gnawed away at his heart, blackening his days — the Sayyid had no son.

What importance do wealth and power have when one is childless? What do glory and prestige matter if there is no one to carry on the family name? And what purpose is there in a life that remains untouched by the happiness brought by children? Thus did the old man ponder these questions, and the more he thought about it, the greater was his sorrow. His prayers came to nothing, the alms he spent were all in vain; he awaited a full moon that would not rise, a rose-garden that would not flower. Yet never did he give up hope.

This one burning desire had scorched his soul to the extent that he forgot everything else. For the sake of the one thing his heart craved, but did not possess, he ignored the manifold bounties that God had granted him — his health, his wealth, his dominions. Is that not,

after all, the way a man's mind works? When goals are not reached and prayers not answered, do we ever stop to think that God's apparent silence may be for our own good? We are convinced that we know our own needs, it is true. But needs are often confused with wants, and those things that are wanted — but not needed — are sometimes the cause of our downfall. Of course, if we could tell what the future holds for us, this confusion would never arise. But the future is veiled from our eyes; the threads of each man's fate extends well beyond the boundaries of the visible world. Where they lead we cannot see. Who can say that today's key will not be tomorrow's lock, or today's lock not tomorrow's key?

And so the Sayyid prayed and fasted and gave alms until, just as he was about to admit defeat, God granted his wish. He was given a boy, a beautiful child like a rosebud freshly opened, like a diamond whose brilliance changes night into day. To celebrate his birth, the Sayyid unlocked the doors of his treasury and scattered gold as though it were sand. Everyone was to share in his joy, and the wondrous event was celebrated with much festivity throughout the land.

The child was placed in the caring, tender hands of a wet-nurse, who suckled him and saw to it that he grew big and strong and healthy. And so he did. Fourteen days after his birth, the boy already resembled the full moon in all its splendour, scattering light upon the earth and enriching the vision of all who cast eyes on him. On the fifteenth day, his parents gave him the name of Kais. Yet all of this was done in secret, hidden

from others so as to ward off the Evil Eye.

A year passed, and the boy's beauty blossomed into perfection. A happy, playful child, he bloomed year by year — a carefully tended flower in the happy rose-garden of childhood. By the end of his seventh year, the first fine down of approaching adulthood began to shine like a violet sheath on his tulip-red cheeks. Whoever caught sight of him, even from a distance, would call down God's blessings upon him, and by the time the first decade of his life was over, the people told stories of his beauty as though they were recounting fairy tales.

Chapter 2

Mindful of the boy's need for education, the Sayyid placed his son under the tutorship of a renowned scholar, a sage to whom all Arabs of noble descent entrusted their children so that they might acquire wisdom and the skills needed for desert life. No matter that these children often feared their teacher, for now was the time to put away their toys and take up their books in earnest.

Kais was diligent and enthusiastic. Before long, he had outshone his peers in every subject, proving to be the best pupil his teacher had ever taught. In reading and writing, in particular, he excelled; when he spoke, be it in debate or simple conversation, his tongue scattered pearls of wisdom, and it was a delight to listen to him.

But then something quite unexpected happened.

Kais' fellow pupils were, like him, mostly from noble families of different tribes, and they included several young girls. One day a new girl joined the class, a girl of such dazzling beauty that Kais, along with every other boy in the class, was smitten instantly.

The girl's name was Layla, from the Arabic 'layl', which means 'night'. In keeping with her name, her hair was indeed as dark as night itself, while beneath the shadow of her hair, her face shone out like a radiant beacon of beauty. Her eyes were dark and deep and lustrous, like the eyes of a gazelle, and with one flutter of her eyelashes she could have reduced the whole world to ruins. Her tiny mouth opened only to say the sweetest things, and when others responded — either with words or smiles — she would blush, bringing blood-red roses into bloom on her milk-white cheeks.

The iciest of hearts would have melted at the very sight of this miracle of creation, but the young Kais felt more passionately about the newcomer than any of his peers. He was drowning in a sea of love before he even knew what love was. He had given his heart to the girl before he had even realised what it was that he was giving away. Layla, for her part, fared no better, for she, too, had fallen. A fire had been lit in both their hearts, one reflecting the other. And what could they do to ward off the flames? Nothing. They were children, and children accept what comes to them with little question. Love was a wine-bearer who had filled their cups to the brim, and they drank whatever he poured for them. And in due course they became intoxicated, not realising the power of the wine. The first intoxication is always the

most severe. The first fall is always the hardest. The first cut is always the deepest.

And so it went on, until they were both too far gone to turn back, entranced by a magic power whose source they did not recognise, whose magic was too great for them to fight. They drank deeply from the cup of love both night and day, and the more they drank, the deeper they became immersed in each other. Their eyes became blind and their ears became deaf to the school and the world beyond the classroom. Both Kais and Layla had lost themselves ... and found each other.

Chapter 3

They say that first love is the greatest, and that its happy memory never dies. For Kais and Layla this was most certainly true. Indeed, so intense was their happiness that they did not dare question it, for fear that it might disappear as quickly as it had come upon them.

For Kais, Layla was like the sun, ascending into his sky with a beauty and radiance unparalleled. With each passing day she shone more brightly, illuminating not only his world but the worlds of all those who had the good fortune to meet her. The other boys were sunstruck, too, filled with awe by her blinding light. During their lessons, they would stare at her open-mouthed, until the teacher appeared with his stick to beat them back to their lessons. If the school was closed, they would roam the alleyways and the

passages between the market stalls, all in the hope of catching a tiny glimpse of her dimpled face. And whenever they did, they would feel like pomegranates, full of juice and fit to burst with desire. Such was her attraction.

Naturally, Kais knew that the other boys desired her, but he also knew that they could not desire her as much as he did, and so their antics did not perturb him in the least. Yet at the same time he felt a certain unease, a sense of foreboding of what fate had in store. Given the miracle of Layla's beauty, he knew that he would never be alone with her. He knew that there would always be someone — or something — that would come between them. Suddenly, the whole situation seemed to change and that which he had thought perfect now appeared to have its defects. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, a small black cloud appeared on his horizon.

But is that not always the case? Nothing lasts forever: everything in this transient world is fated, one day, to perish.

While the two lovers basked in the glow of each other's love, quaffing the wine of forgetfulness and enjoying the paradise of oblivion, the eyes of the world were on them. Did others realise what had happened between Kais and his Layla? Did they see the stolen looks, the furtive glances that passed between them? Could they read the signs and crack the codes of secret love that bound their hearts together? Who knew about them, and how much was known? Nothing was said, of course. Until one day, in the market, a voice was heard

to say, 'Kais and Layla are in love. Have you not heard?'

A whisper, they say, can cause a kingdom to fall. And soon the rumours were being whispered all over the town, from tent to tent, and stall to stall.

Slowly, the two lovers began to realise how blind they had been. People had seen them together, heard them talking, watched them laughing and they, in their cocoon of love, had been completely unaware. The veil was torn, the wall had crumbled, and now it was time for action. To save themselves, and to protect their love, they tried to tame their wild glances and seal their love-hungry lips.

But desire and caution rarely mix and love, once out in the open, cannot be hidden. Caution is no chain for a heart that is already chained by its lover's beauty. What was Kais to do? His soul was a mirror for Layla's radiance: how could he keep such a reflection to himself? She shone in him like the sun at noon in a cloudless sky: how could such light be concealed? How could he turn away, even for a second, from the only thing that gave meaning to his life? Kais' heart was out of step with his reason, and however hard he tried to hide his love for Layla, he failed miserably. With her, he felt the arrows of reproach from a thousand bows; without her, the pain of separation cut into his heart like a knife.

Kais could see no way out of his predicament, and in his confusion he fell. Having lost his heart, he now lost his mind. All he could do was wander around in a trance, extolling Layla's beauty and praising her virtues

to everyone he met. The more people saw him and heard what he had to say, the more insane he appeared and the more bizarre became his behaviour. And everywhere the stares and the pointing fingers, the laughter and the derision, the cries of 'Here comes the madman, the "majnun"!'

For Layla's people, the entire situation became intolerable. Not only Layla's honour, but the honour of her whole tribe was at stake. Was it right that they should have their integrity questioned and their name tarnished by this mad boy from the Banu Amir? Was it right that Layla's reputation should be sullied? They had to act, and act fast. The first thing they did was ban Layla from leaving her tent. A guard was posted at the entrance with orders to apprehend Kais should he try to approach the girl. Thus did they conceal the new moon from the baying hound.

And there was nothing that Layla could say or do to prevent it. Furthermore, she had to hide her grief — grief that threatened to tear her heart in two. Only when she was alone did she let the mask drop and allow her lonely tears to fall.

Chapter 4

Kais' separation from Layla brought about his separation from the rest of those he loved — from his family and friends, from his parents and home. And if Layla wept in secret, Kais wept openly, displaying his sorrow for the world to see.

He wandered aimlessly through the market where the merchants had their stalls, talking to no one, driven by nothing more than an aching heart, oblivious to the people and their staring eyes and pointing fingers. And as he wandered from stall to stall, from tent to tent, haunting love-songs were on his lips, tears of separation in his eyes. Passers-by would shout, 'There goes the "majnun", the madman. Hey, Majnun!'

The shell of his being had cracked, revealing the rawness of his soul. He was open, exposed, his innermost feelings and emotions laid bare. Not only

had he lost Layla, he had lost himself. The pain in his heart was reflected in his face; it glowed like fire and no one could mistake it. Kais, one of the walking, talking wounded. Kais the lost, the forgotten; Kais the orphan of fate.

The longer his suffering lasted, the more Kais became what the people were already calling him: Majnun, the 'mad one'. Is it not madness to burn at all times like a candle? Is it not madness, this inability to eat or sleep? The more he searched for a cure, the worse became the pain. And each day at dusk, the phantoms of his vain aspirations and ambitions would march him to the edge of the town and kick him out into the desert, barefoot and without so much as a cloak to throw around his shoulders.

He was mad, it is true, but he was also a poet. In his separation from Layla — a separation that had made him her slave — he was moved to compose the most beautiful odes and sonnets in her name, verses the likes of which those who were fortunate enough to hear had never heard before. And in the still of the night, he would cover himself with the cloak of darkness and steal to Layla's tent. Sometimes others would accompany him — friends who, like Majnun, had tasted love and known the pain of separation — but mostly he went alone. Moving like the desert wind he would fly to her tent, stand at the threshold and say a quiet prayer, then return home as quickly as he had come.

So near, yet so far. How difficult it was for him to pull himself away from his beloved's tent and return

home! On his way to her, he would almost fly; on his way back, he would stumble like a drunkard or a wounded animal. Why was Fate so unkind? His heart had been wrecked like a ship caught in a storm; what was left of him now drifted at the mercy of the waves. His home had become a prison where people talked, but never listened; where people counselled, but never understood. He had reached a point where he no longer paid any attention to what they were saying; he was past caring. Only the word 'Layla' meant anything to him now; when people talked of other things, he would block his ears and say nothing.

One day he would walk around as though in a trance; the next day would find him falling this way and that like a drunkard, weeping bitter tears and moaning. Verses of love streamed from his lips; when the poetry stopped, the messages began. He called the east wind and asked it to take a message to Layla, whose tribe had set up camp in the mountains of Najd.

'East wind, go quickly and you will find her there,' he said. 'Caress her hair softly and whisper in her ear. Say, "The one who has sacrificed everything for you sends greetings from afar. Send him a breath of air on the wind to let him know you still think of him."

'Dearest heart, if I had not given my soul to you, it would have been better to give it up for good, to lose it for ever. I am burning in love's fire; I am drowning in the tears of my sorrow. Even the sun that lights up the world can feel the heat of my desire. I am the moth that flies through the night to flutter around the candle flame. O invisible candle of my soul, do not torture me

as I encircle you! You have bewitched me, you have robbed me of my sleep, my reason, my very being.

'You are the cause of my pain, yet the love I feel for you is my only consolation, my only cure. How strange, a cure that brings even greater pain! If only you could send me a sign! If only the wind could touch your lips and bring your kisses to me, but then I should be jealous of the wind and ashamed of myself for asking.

'The Evil Eye has separated us, dearest heart. Fate has cast her evil spell and knocked the cup from my hand: the wine is gone and I am dying of thirst. And now Fate mocks me as I lie dying. Yes, I am one of those who are cursed by the Eye, by Fate, by whatever you choose to call it. Who would not be afraid of such an enemy? People try to protect themselves from the Evil Eye by wearing blue amulets; even the sun, terrified of the darkness, wears a sky-blue veil to ward off evil. I did not wear an amulet and so I lost everything. Yes, everything. I lost everything because I lost you, for you are my everything. If this is not the work of Fate, then whose work is it? And if it is the work of Fate, then I have every right to be afraid. And to be mad ...'

Chapter 5

The new dawn cast its cloak of gold over the earth, pinned the golden stud of the sun to the ear of the sky and banished the stars with one glance.

And now Majnun appeared, his friends at his side, near the tent of his beloved Layla. He was risking much; never before had he ventured this far without the veil of night to cover him. But his patience had worn thin and he could bear the situation no longer. His heart was melting for Layla; before it was destroyed completely, he had to see her. Like a drunkard, his mind confused and dazed, he stumbled towards her tent, verses of love falling from his lips.

And suddenly he was there, on the very threshold of his heart's most holy shrine. He had to rub his eyes to make sure he was not still dreaming. But there it

stood — Layla's tent — and, to his amazement, the curtains were drawn back. And there, sitting in the entrance of the tent, clearly visible in the half-light, was Layla herself.

Majnun let out a deep groan, as though ready to faint. And then Layla saw him. For a second that seemed like an eternity their eyes met, and in the mirror of each other's gaze they read the whole story of their fear, their longing, their pain and their love. Tears filled their eyes as they spoke to each other with mute eloquence, exchanging sighs on the breeze that acted as messenger between them.

Layla was the radiance of dawn itself; Majnun was a candle, slowly consuming itself with desire before her. Layla in her splendour was a rose-garden; Majnun was a beacon of longing. Layla scattered the seeds of love; Majnun watered them with his tears. Layla was a spirit beauty from another world; Majnun was the blazing torch that lit her way from that world to the world of men. Layla was a jasmin blossom in spring; Majnun was an autumn plain, where no jasmin grows. Layla could bewitch the world with one glance; Majnun was her slave, an entranced dervish whirling before her. Layla had the cup that held the wine of love; Majnun stood intoxicated by its musky scent.

Only this briefest of encounters were the lovers allowed, and then it was over. One more second and even this, the most fleeting of pleasures, might have ended in disaster for both of them. Afraid that he would be apprehended by guards or spies, Majnun took to his heels and fled.

Chapter 6

It was not long before Majnun's secret visits to Layla's tent became common knowledge. Layla's people were outraged and, by night and day, they guarded the area around her tent lest the intruder return. Gradually, through no fault of her own, Layla became a prisoner of her own people ... and of Majnun's love.

Majnun continued to roam the mountains and desert wastes of Najd, spending more and more time away from his own tribe. Clad in rags, he wandered aimlessly through the desert, composing odes and sonnets that he sang in mournful tones to himself. Broken by grief, he could think of nothing but his love for Layla: food, sleep, family, friends — it was, to his broken heart, as if they had never existed. The two or three friends who had accompanied him on his night-

time visits to Layla's tent had long since left him. Unable to bear the wild changes in Majnun's temperament, they too had come to think of him as crazy, demented, and completely deranged by love. Those who caught sight of him from afar would point and cry, 'There he is! There goes Majnun, the madman, the lunatic once known as Kais! There goes the fool who has heaped so much shame and ignominy on himself and his tribe.'

And it was true: there was not a single member of his tribe who did not feel ashamed of Majnun's behaviour. But they had done everything in their power to make him see reason, to help him and to prevent a disaster from taking place. How can one put out a blazing fire with advice and good counsel? How can one stop an ocean of tears with mere words? Yet, although they had exhausted all possibilities, Majnun's people knew that the situation could not continue unchecked. Majnun's own sanity, his family's reputation, the honour of the whole tribe — all of these were now at risk. Could Majnun's father, the Sayyid, not do something? After all, he was the leader of the Banu Amir, and if anyone was in a position to do something positive, surely it was he.

Yet the Sayyid was, like those around him, completely powerless to help. Who can turn back the hands of time and change the course of Fate? Furthermore, he was by now an old man, the burden of his years exacerbated by the strain of his son's madness. The only thing he could do was pray that Majnun would come to his senses and become Kais once more.

But his son's condition did not improve, and Majnun remained Majnun. Indeed, his state went from bad to worse — so wretched did it become that his father was moved to convene a meeting of tribal elders to discuss the problem and try to arrive at a final solution. Assembling in his tent all of his counsellors and advisers, the old Sayyid asked those present to tell him what they knew. One by one they stepped forward with their stories of Kais (Majnun) and his madness, each tale more harrowing than the last. The old Sayyid's heart grew heavier with each passing moment. Finally, after he had reflected upon everything he had heard, he said, 'It is clear that my son has abandoned all reason and given up his heart, his soul and his mind to this girl. Only if he wins her will he be restored to his former state. Only if he attains his heart's desire will Majnun become Kais once more. It is a painful situation, yet not difficult to understand. The boy's senses are confused. For him, Layla is the light which illuminates his world; since that light is hidden from his view, he lives in darkness, like one without sight. I say that we must find this light, this jewel of piercing brightness and surrender it to him. Only when one dusts away the dirt from the rosebud will it bloom.'

Then the old man asked all of the tribal elders in turn to voice their opinions. Amazingly, they were all in agreement: a delegation was to be despatched immediately to Layla's tribe, their aim to win Layla's hand for Majnun and thus put an end to the boy's suffering. Within the hour a party of tribal elders,

led by the old Sayyid himself, was on its way.

Now, there was no history of feuding between the two tribes, and so the Sayyid was confident that the outcome would be to his son's advantage. And indeed, he and his men were received most cordially by Layla's people, who treated their visitors with great kindness and hospitality. Presently, his hosts asked the old Sayyid to tell them why he had come. Was he in need of help of some kind? Did he need their support in some feud or battle? The old Sayyid cleared his throat and looked Layla's father in the eye.

'Noble sir,' began the old Sayyid, 'I have come here to strengthen the ties of friendship that have always existed between us. I have come here to ask for your daughter's hand on behalf of my son, Kais. May they long be the light of each other's lives! There is no greater love than that which exists between our two children, and I see no impediment — save for your possible refusal — to their union. Nor am I ashamed to make this request so frankly, so openly. As you are aware, there is none among us whose standing is higher in society than my own. My wealth is without parallel and my supporters are without number. I can be either a most valuable friend or a most formidable foe. Whatever you require as a dowry, I shall give you — and much more besides. I am not a man to stand on ceremony: I have come here as a customer, and you, if you know what is good for you — and I have no doubt that you do — will state your price clearly and sell me what I want. You stand to make great gains if you move now: tomorrow may be too late.'

His anxiety for his son had made the old Sayyid more audacious than usual in his approach and manner of speaking, but what had been said could not be unsaid. Layla's father, a proud man at the best of times, nodded slowly and replied, 'You speak well, my friend, and your words are weighty enough. But you cannot change what has been decreed by Fate with words alone. Did you really imagine that I would be moved to accept your request by the force of your rhetoric? Did you really think that I would not see beneath the surface of your eloquence? What you have shown me is attractive enough, but that which lies under the cover, the very thing that would give my enemies happiness, you fail to mention! Yes, indeed, your son is a prince of men, a veritable idol of love — from a distance. And from a distance he would be welcome even in the family of the Caliph himself. But we all know better than that, don't we? Do you think I am so cut off from the world that news from the outside does not reach me? Do you not realise that the story of your son's madness is known throughout the land? And did you really believe that I would take a madman for a son-in-law? For I swear by God that he is mad, and a madman is no husband for my daughter.

'Thus, my dear friend, I must ask you to leave. My advice is this: pray to our Lord that your son be cured of his illness. Until he is cured, I will hear no more talk of love or marriage between him and my daughter. I hope, dear friend, that I have made myself clear.'

The old Sayyid had no option but to withdraw his request and depart. Defeat did not sit easily with him,

and the words spoken by Layla's father had stung him like a swarm of bees, yet what else could he do but give in? And so he returned to Majnun, silent and empty-handed.

Chapter 7

Having failed to win Layla for his son, the old Sayyid enlisted the aid of his son's friends in one last attempt to make his son see reason with words of advice and good counsel.

His friends took Majnun to one side and gently remonstrated with him. 'Why only Layla?' they said. 'There are many girls in your own tribe who are every bit as desirable as Layla: sweet-scented, tulip-cheeked beauties with lips like rosebuds and eyes like narcissi —beauties who are perhaps even more attractive than the one who has stolen your heart! Why, we know of hundreds of such sweet maidens — you have only to take your pick! Come now, instead of torturing your poor heart and turning it into a shrine for the one you cannot have, find someone who will comfort it and fill

it with joy! Choose a mate from your own tribe, a companion for life who will be worthy of you. Forget Layla. Let her go!'

Majnun knew that his friends meant well, but when all was said and done they had no idea how intense the fire of his love for Layla really was: those who have never experienced such pain cannot understand it, let alone counsel against it. Indeed, instead of extinguishing the flames, their words served merely to fan them, and by the time they had finished advising him, the conflagration was blazing more fiercely than before.

Majnun's despair was now deeper than it had ever been. There was nothing anyone could say to console him; there was nothing anyone could do to ease his pain, a pain that had darkened his days and turned his world to perpetual night. He could neither eat nor sleep: most of the time he would wander around in a daze, occasionally becoming conscious enough of his pain to pummel his face with his fists and tear his robes. Majnun was homeless, an exile from the land of happiness and an inconsolable mourner in the land of pain.

Eventually, Majnun felt that he could tolerate the company of others no longer. And so he left his parents, his relatives and his friends and ran away, deep into the desert, not knowing where he would go or what he would do. Crying, 'There is no power except for the power of God', he stumbled through the alleyways and past the market stalls, desiring only to put himself at the mercy of his Lord and the desert wastes.

For Majnun, good and bad were no longer distinguishable; for him, what was right and what was wrong could no longer be known. He was a lover, and love knows no laws. And so he ran, tears streaming from his eyes, the cry of 'Layla, Layla!' on his lips. He paid no attention to the stares and pointing fingers of the people as he ran; indeed, he neither saw them nor heard their shouts and their reproaches. Gradually people began to follow him, fascinated and magnetised by his bizarre appearance and even stranger behaviour, although in his trance-like state he paid them no mind. Yet, when he began to recite his poetry and sing his verses of love, their purely prurient interest in Majnun as a spectacle waned, and they began to sympathise with him. The fire in his heart had touched theirs, too, and as the haunting sonnets and beautiful odes tripped off his tongue, the hearts of his listeners trembled and many of them began to cry with him.

Yet Majnun noticed none of this; he was not even aware that he was being followed. He was not even aware of himself: it was as though he had ceased to exist, as though his name had been erased from the book of Creation, causing him to be forgotten. His heart was crushed, his flame of life had all but gone out, the bird of his soul had lost its will to live and now lay, fluttering helplessly in the dust, waiting for death to overtake it.

In the end, he felt all of the strength pour out of his limbs and he fell to his knees, as though at prayer. With parched lips he cried out, 'For God's sake, who can cure me of this sickness? I am an exile, an orphan, an

outcast. Where is my home? Where are my friends, my family? I am cut off from them completely and they have no road to me, either. And I am separated from the one I love. My name is dirt and my reputation is ruined, like a crystal goblet smashed upon the rock of Fate. My world was once filled with the music of happiness; now all that I hear is the solemn drumbeat of separation.

'Layla, my love, my dearest heart! I am your slave, your victim: I am the hunter captured by the game! My soul cannot help but follow the mistress who owns it. If she says, "Drink the wine of love and become intoxicated!", then I must obey; if she says, "Become mad with desire!", who am I to argue? There is no way that a madman such as Majnun can be tamed, so do not try. What hope can there be for a heart as crushed as mine? My only hope is that the earth will open up and swallow me whole, or that a lightning bolt will flash through the heavens and strike me dead! Is there no one who will hand me over to the angel of death? Is there no one who will save me from myself, and thus save the rest of the world from my madness? For I am truly mad; I am a misfit, a lunatic, a demon in human guise! I am an embarrassment to my family and a thorn in the flesh of my tribe: the very mention of my name causes all who know me to hang their heads in shame. Anyone may shed my blood: I declare it lawful for them. For I am an outlaw, and whoever kills me will not be guilty of murder.

'So goodbye, dear friends, for I must depart. May God bless and keep you, and may you forgive me. There is nothing you can do for me now: the goblet has

fallen from my hands and the wine is spilled. Of my happiness, and my sanity, only the razor-sharp shards are left; see how they cut into me and through me.'

The people surrounding him looked on in disbelief as he spoke, wondering whether he was aware of their presence at all. Then, as if to banish their doubts, he turned to them and said, 'I do not expect you to understand what I say, for you have no idea how I suffer. So leave me, let me go. And do not try to find me, for your search will be in vain. How will you find me when I am lost, even to myself? Go now, for I cannot bear your torture and oppression any longer. Leave me alone with my grief. There is no need to escort me out of the town, for I shall go of my own accord. Farewell!'

But Majnun no longer had the strength to move. Instead, he fell to his knees in the dust, as though in prayer, and began to implore his beloved to help him.

'Layla, I have fallen. I have fallen and I do not know what to do. Come, dearest heart, and take my hand. Reach out and touch me, for I can bear this loneliness no longer. I am yours, so come and take me: I am more use to you alive than dead. Be kind and give me some sign; send some message to revive my soul. Why don't you come? Why have they imprisoned you when it is I, the madman, who should be in chains? Come and enslave me, my love! Do something, for the love of God! To live like this is worse than death: come and end this torture now! Things cannot remain as they are; it is not right that you should sit there and do nothing. Have you no pity? No, it would seem that you

do not. After all, those who are in comfort have no feeling for those who are in misery. What do the rich know about poverty? What does the full stomach care about those who starve? We are both human beings: does our common humanity mean nothing to you? Are you content to blossom and bloom while I wither and die?

'You have the power to bring peace to my soul, yet you withhold it. What have I done to deserve this? Why, not content with stealing my heart, do you rob me of my sanity? Apart from the fact that I love you, what sin have I committed that I should be treated in this way?

'I am not asking for much: even one night — one night out of a thousand nights — will do. Apart from the love I feel for you, I have nothing: everything else I have abandoned, gambled away and lost.

'Please, I beg you, do not reject me. If you are angry with me, extinguish your wrath with my tears. Dearest heart, you are the new moon and I am a star that has fallen to earth out of longing for you. I am alone and friendless: my only companion is my shadow, and even with him I dare not speak the truth about my love for you, lest he become jealous and try to take you from me. What can I do? Can I hope? A man dying of thirst dreams of cool, clear streams, but when he wakes there is only sand. But what does it all matter? Whatever happens to me, nothing can destroy the love I feel for you in my heart. It is indeed a mystery, a riddle, a lock without a key, a book that cannot be opened, a code that no one can crack. Love

for you is part of me: it entered my veins along with the milk from my mother's breast, and it will leave me only when my soul departs my body. Of that I am certain.'

As his voice trailed away, Majnun's legs gave way and he fell forward into the dust. Those who had been listening rushed forward to help him; gently, they lifted him up and carried him home to his father's tent.

Time passes, but true love remains. The life of this world is, for the most part, nothing but a succession of illusions and deceptions. But true love is real, and the flames which fuel it burn forever, without beginning or end. And thus, Majnun became famous throughout the land as a lover, for the fire of true love burned in his soul like a blazing torch as long as he lived.

Chapter 8

Majnun's passion grew with each passing day, and as it grew, so his reputation among family and friends declined accordingly.

But his close relatives, and especially his dear father, the old Sayyid, had not given up hope completely. They knew that the darkest hour is always before dawn, and that with love and patience it still might be possible to save the boy. Once more, the old Sayyid convened a meeting of tribal elders to discuss his son's problem. After much debate, the thoughts of those present turned to Mecca and God's most holy house, the ka'ba. Every year, many thousands of pilgrims from near and far would visit the sacred precinct, performing their pilgrimage rites and asking for God's help and forgiveness. Why not take Majnun to Mecca, too?

'After all,' said one of the elders, 'only God can open the lock for which we impotent humans have no key. Maybe He in His compassion will come to our aid and cure this poor wretch of his affliction. The ka'ba is a place of prayer and contemplation for men and angels alike; it is the altar of the heavens and the earth, where all men ask God to help and forgive them. Why should He not help us?'

Majnun's father agreed, and on the first day of the last month of the year — the month of pilgrimage — he left with a small caravan of his best camels for the holy city of Mecca. Majnun, still too weak to walk, was carried in a litter, like a tiny child in a cradle.

Finally, they reached Mecca and set up camp. As he had done throughout the journey, the old Sayyid gave charity by showering gold on the crowds as though it were sand. His heart, once so heavy with despair, lightened as soon as he caught sight of the ka'ba, around which thousands of white-robed pilgrims were circling like moths around a flame. He could hardly wait for the moment when he would be able to present his wretched, love-sick child to his Lord and petition Him humbly for assistance.

At last, it was time for them to perform their rites. Taking his son gently by the hand, the old Sayyid said, 'Here, my son, is the House of One who is a friend to all those without friends. Here is the House of One who can cure all ills, even those ills that have no cure. Yes, my son, this is where — God willing — one chapter of your life ends and another begins. We have come here so that you may seek solace in God and find

relief from your sufferings. Call upon God by His most beautiful names and ask Him to help you. Ask Him to save you from your obsession. Ask Him to take pity on you, to grant you refuge and lead you back to the path of sanity and goodness. Tell the Lord how unhappy you are and ask Him to unlock the door of your grief and let it flow away. Ask Him to free you from the evil of your desire, before it is too late. Go, my son, and do as I say.'

At first, the old Sayyid's words brought tears to his son's eyes. But then Majnun began to laugh. Jumping down from his litter, he dashed into the crowd and, snaking in and out of the pressing throng, found a way to the ka'ba, which he began to pound with his fists. Then, with a voice that hovered between laughter and tears, he cried out, 'Yes, it is I who have come to knock at Your door today! I, Majnun, the madman, the fool who has sold his life for the sake of love! And may I remain love's slave for ever!

'O Lord! They tell me that only if I abandon love will I regain my sanity, but the truth is that love is all I have! Love is my strength, my rock. If love dies, then I die with it. Such is my fate, as You know. O Lord, I beg You, by all of Your names and attributes, let my love grow! Let it blossom to perfection and endure, even if I fade away and die! Let me drink from the well-spring of love until my thirst is quenched. And if I am already intoxicated with love's wine, let me become more so!

'O Lord! They tell me to banish Layla from my thoughts and to crush the desire I have for her in my

heart. But I beg You, Lord, to engrave her image more deeply on my mind's eye and make my desire for her even stronger! Take what is left of my earthly existence and offer it to her as a gift; take the rest of my life from me and add it to hers.

'O Lord! Let her berate me, castigate me, punish me — I do not care. I am ready to sacrifice my life for the sake of her beauty. Do You not see how I burn for her? And although I know that I shall never be free of this pain, it does not matter. For that is how it has to be. And so, dear God, for Your own sake and for the sake of love, let my love grow stronger with each passing hour. Love is all I have, all I am, and all I ever want to be!'

The old Sayyid listened in amazement as Majnun cried out to his Lord. What could he do for his son now? Their last resort — the pilgrimage to God's own house — had failed. Now he knew beyond all doubt that there was nothing anyone on earth could do to loosen the chains of love that were binding the boy's heart.

And so they left Mecca and began the long journey home, where Majnun's friends and relatives awaited them in hope and fear. When they arrived, the whole family came out to welcome them. 'How did it go?' they all asked. 'Tell us, has God cured the boy of his affliction or not?'

The old Sayyid could only shake his head, tears misting his vision. 'I tried my best', he said weakly. 'I told him how to ask God for help, so that He in His compassion might free the boy from this plague in

skirts, this accursed Layla. But Majnun had other ideas. And so what did he do? He called down blessings on Layla ... and then he cursed himself!'

Chapter 9

News of Majnun's pilgrimage to Mecca, his hammering on the doors of the ka'ba and his impassioned confession of love soon spread far and wide; before long, talk of Majnun's love — and his madness — was on everyone's lips. Some attacked him with harsh words of reproach, while others pitied him and came to his defence. A few had good things to say about him, while many were content to sit and gloat ... and to spread evil rumours.

Talk of Majnun reached Layla, too, but there was little she could do to defend her lover: she simply sat in silence, nursing her grief. The members of her tribe, however, knew that they must act. And so they sent a delegation to the Caliph's Chief Minister and lodged a complaint against Majnun.

'This lunatic,' said the Chief Delegate, 'this

madman, this Majnun, has dishonoured our tribe with his behaviour. Day and night he wanders around the countryside, his filthy hair matted and his clothes in tatters, with a bunch of vagrants and vagabonds in tow. He laughs for no reason, cries for no reason; he screams and shouts and dances and whirls, jumping up into the air, prostrating himself in the dust and kissing the earth below. And all the time he recites his sonnets and his odes, his songs and his quatrains — verse after verse after verse. The unfortunate thing is that his poetry is of the highest quality and the people have taken to committing his songs to memory. This is bad for us and for you, since the words of his song are, for the most part, an affront to public dignity and the high moral standards of society. As you may have heard, his verses concern our leader's daughter, Layla; her name is on the lips of every man, woman and child in the land. It is not only an affront to public decency, it is a slur on her honour and dignity. We ask, therefore, that you apprehend this rogue and put an end to this business, so that both Layla and the members of our tribe may be safe from this most pernicious affliction.'

As soon as the delegate had finished speaking, the Minister rose from his chair, unsheathed his sword and showed it to the members of the delegation. 'Tame the madman with this, if you can', he said. 'And I wish you well.'

Now the Minister's words were overheard by a member of Majnun's tribe, the Banu Amir, who happened to be at court that day. Wasting no time, he rushed to tell the old Sayyid, Majnun's father, what he had heard.

'Layla's tribe are out for Majnun's blood,' he cried; 'The Caliph's Chief Minister has sanctioned this business himself. I was there when it happened: the man was like a dragon possessed, breathing fire and spewing threats. We must warn Majnun before it is too late. A well has opened up in the middle of his path; unless we take the blindfold from his eyes, he will fall into it and be lost for ever.'

The informant's words pierced the old man's heart like a hundred arrows. Fearing for his son's life, he sent several of his men to find him and bring him to safety. One by one they came back, empty-handed and disheartened. 'Majnun is nowhere to be found,' they said, 'and we fear that his fate has already been sealed. Either that, or he has been devoured by wild animals, who can tell?' At which point, Majnun's friends and relations began to weep and wail as though mourning the dead.

But their kinsman was not dead. Majnun was safe — for the time being — in one of his mountain retreats. He was quite alone; like the Creator before the first act of creation, Majnun was a 'hidden treasure, waiting to be discovered'. He had no idea what was happening back in the world of men; indeed, for him that world had all but ceased to exist. Why should it concern him? Had he not abandoned it, given it up, turned his back on it? He had troubles enough of his own, trials and tribulations to fill a thousand such worlds — why should he care about the world he had left behind? How could they help him anyway? He was suffering because he was unable to reach the treasure for which he had

given up his life. What good were friends and family at a time like this?

But Majnun did not remain alone and undiscovered. Several days after the delegation had petitioned the Caliph's minister, a Bedouin from the tribe known as Banu Saad was passing through the area when he saw a huddled figure crouching under a thorn bush. At first, he thought it was a mirage of some sort; after all, who in his right mind would choose to reside in such a desolate, God-forsaken place? But then he saw the figure move and heard it moan. Approaching him cautiously, he said, 'Who are you and what are you doing here? Is there anything I can do for you?'

He repeated his questions over and over again, but Majnun gave no response. Finally, the Bedouin gave up and went on his way, but as soon as he reached his destination he told his family what he had seen on the road. 'It was a creature,' he explained, 'obviously a madman in great pain, writhing under a thorn bush like a wounded snake. His hair was filthy and dishevelled, his clothes no more than soiled rags, and there was nothing left of his body but skin and bone.'

The news of this man's encounter with Majnun eventually reached the old Sayyid, who set out at once to find his son and bring him back from the wilderness. When finally he found his son, Majnun was exactly as the Bedouin had described him: pale, emaciated, dirty and incoherent. He wept, stood up, fell down again, groaned, and began to writhe in the dust. The old man bent down, put his hand under his son's head and looked into his eyes. At first, Majnun did not recognise

his father, and it was only when the old Sayyid began to talk that Majnun knew who it was that had come to his aid. And with this recognition came another flood of tears as Majnun clasped his father to his breast and sobbed. Then, when the storm had subsided, he said, 'Dear Father, forgive me! Do not ask how I am, because you can see that there is not much left of my life. I wish you did not have to see me in this state; to behold your angel face while mine is in the dust fills me with shame so deep, I cannot begin to describe it. Forgive me, Father, but know this too: none of this is my fault. You see, dear one, the thread of my fate lies in the hand of another ... '

Chapter 10

Frustration clouding his senses, the old Sayyid tore at his turban and threw it to the ground in despair. His world had crumbled; his day had turned to endless night. He breathed deeply and tried to regain his composure. Drawing on his last reserves of strength and courage, he began to speak: 'You were once a flower — my flower — but now your petals are crushed and torn and I no longer recognise you! Look at you! You immature, love-sick fool! Who has put this curse on you? What sins have you committed that you should be forced to do such penance? You are falling to your death: tell me, who pushed you over the edge?

'Yes, you are young, and the follies of youth are to be excused. But folly to this extent? This is not folly — this is pure madness. Have you not suffered enough? Has your heart not felt enough pain? Enough is enough!

This passion of yours is destroying you and me and my honour. Why this reckless abandon, this lack of self-control? Can you not see what you are doing to yourself? If you cannot see, then let me be your mirror. Let me show you what you are doing, so that you may stop. Unchain your heart from this self-inflicted slavery! Free your heart and your mind from this sickness you have brought upon yourself!'

The old man caressed his son's cheek with his trembling fingers. Then, with tears in his eyes, he continued: 'You won't even look at me. Am I not your friend? You do not have to be alone, my son. Those who escape and try to remain aloof will always be alone — alone with their grief. You do not have to escape, at least not while there is a place for you in my heart.

'Do not forget, we are both of the same flesh and blood. While you are moaning for your love, I am mourning for you; while you are tearing your robes in desperation, my heart is being torn in two. When you burn, I burn also; when you cry, I drown in your tears.

'I beg you, wake up before it is too late. There is still time, still hope. You must never give up hope. Even those little things that seem on the surface to be useless can help you attain salvation, if only you knew. And have faith in God; with faith in Him, even despair can be turned into hope, believe me.

'Have hope and try to be happy! Mix with those who laugh and joke and make merry: do not shun them! By mixing with those who are happy, you too will find happiness, of this I am certain. It will come slowly at first, but it will come, believe me. Does the mighty

mountain not consist of tiny grains of sand? Is the vast ocean not made up of tiny drops of water? With patience, your happiness, too, will grow; it will grow so great that all of the sorrows you now suffer will be forgotten. All you need is time — time and patience.

'And with time and patience, you will forget her. And rightly so — after all, why do you give your heart to a rose that blossoms without you, while you remain in the dirt? Only a heart of stone could crush a heart like yours, for that is what she has done. And so, she is best forgotten.

'My dear child, you are more precious to me than life itself. I beg you, come back home! What is there for you here in these mountains except pain and loneliness and tears? If you remain here, your madness will increase and eventually you will be lost for ever — even to yourself. The sword of death hangs over you, as it hangs over us all, and so you must regain your senses while there is still time. Leave this hell and come back with me; choose joy, not grief, and thus make your enemies weep!'

Chapter 11

Majnun listened in complete silence as the old Sayyid opened his heart and poured out his grief and his hopes. Then, as his father's words trailed away, he gave his reply.

'You, most noble sir, are the pride of all Arabs and the master of all that you see. And you are my father, my flesh and blood, whom I love with all my heart and respect with all my being. You gave me my life; may you never lose yours, and may I never lose you. Father, I kneel before you as your slave.

'Yet, dear Father, you ask me to do the impossible. For I have not chosen the path which I tread: I have been thrown on to it. I am chained and bound by fetters of iron, but it was not I who put them in place. If I am a slave to love, then it is the decree of Fate that I be such. The ties bound by Fate cannot be undone.

I cannot shake off these fetters; I cannot unburden myself unless Fate unburdens me first. Does the moon rise by its own power? Do the tides turn of their own accord? Search the cosmos and examine every living thing, from ant to elephant, and you will find no creature that is not ruled by the dictates and decrees of Fate.

'There is a stone bearing down on my heart. Who can remove it? Not I! There is a fire burning in my soul. Who can put out that fire? Not I! I bear a burden that has been put on my shoulders by Fate, and even if I were to try from now until Doomsday I would not be able to cast it to the ground. You ask me why I do not laugh. I am a sufferer: tears of grief become the sufferer, not tears of joy. Would it become a mother to laugh as she buried her child? Does it accord with reason that someone in my position should laugh?

'Have you not heard, dear Father, of the fable of the partridge and the ant? Then I shall tell you. A partridge was out looking for food when it came across an ant. It seized one of the ant's legs in its beak and was just about to swallow it when the ant cried, "Hey, partridge! If you think you are so clever, let me see you laugh! For laughing is the one thing you are simply no good at!" The partridge, of course, was a proud bird, and just to show the audacious little ant how good she was at laughing, she opened her beak wide and began to cackle. At which point the ant scurried away to safety, leaving the silly partridge alone with no supper.

'And so you see, dear Father, if man laughs when

his situation does not warrant mirth, he will fare no better than the partridge; he will live to regret that he laughed too soon.'

'I, too, have no reason to laugh,' said Majnun. 'Even the dying ass does not throw down its load until death overwhelms it completely: why, then, should it fear dying? It is true, my dear Father, that you warned me — but what lover takes the threat of death seriously? A man consumed by love does not tremble at the thought of dying. A man in search of his beloved is not afraid of the world and its snares. Where is this sword that hangs over me? Let it fall! Layla is the very moon in the sky of my being: since Fate has sent clouds to cover that moon, let the earth swallow me up! If my soul has fallen because of her, so be it: at least the fall was like heaven itself!

'Now let me be, I beg you. My spirit is destroyed, my soul lost forever. What do you want from me?'

Chapter 12

On hearing this, the old man's heart sank and he began to weep. Taking his son gently by the hand, he led him home to the comforting welcome of his family. There, his friends and relatives gathered round, determined to help as best they could.

But to Majnun they were all strangers. Life at home was unbearable; Majnun darkened everyone with his sorrows, and all who came to visit him left in tears of grief and frustration at his plight. For the first few days, his friends were able to placate him by recalling the happy memories of the times they had spent together as children. But soon the enormity of his pain became too much to bear in company, and so, early one morning, Majnun ripped aside the veil of love and protection that his friends and family had cast over him, gathered together a few belongings and escaped once more into

the desert wastes of Najd.

Like a wounded animal he roamed the wilderness, not knowing where to go or what to do. All he knew was that he had to be alone; no longer could he live in the world of men and survive. He had to be alone with his grief, and the desolate land of sand and rocks, of mountains and ravines, was the only place for him. And so he wandered through the mountains, chanting his sonnets and his odes. Majnun the 'madman', alone in the desert with his poems. But even if Majnun was mad, his poetry was not. Even if people berated him, castigated him and heaped upon him insult after insult, they could find no fault with his verses.

And thus it was that people began to come from near and far to hear him recite his verses in his mountain retreat. They would sit at his feet as he sang his songs of love, and as they listened, they would write down the words and take them back to their towns and villages.

Chapter 13

Meanwhile, the promise made by the bud was most definitely being kept by the blossom, for Layla was growing more beautiful with each passing day. One glance from her eyes would have been enough to bring a hundred Kings to their knees; one smile from her ruby lips would have been enough to conquer an entire army, had she so wished.

Her beauty was lost on no one, and no one escaped her snare. Her eyes took prisoner after prisoner, each one tied and bound with her tresses. Anyone who so much as glanced at her flower-like face was smitten instantly, hungry for the nectar of her lips and the honey of her kisses. Yet her eyelashes refused to give charity; her eyes, as they closed, seemed to say: 'God alone can grant you what you desire, for I shall give you nothing.' Hundreds of hearts had already fallen

into the well of her beauty, so powerful was her spell.

Yet although her magic worked on others, for herself she could do nothing. For while she blossomed on the surface, deep inside she wept tears of blood. From dawn until dusk she sought her beloved Majnun in secret; then, at midnight when the world was deaf with sleep, she would call out to him with her sighs. Tears were never far away, and if she laughed, she laughed to hide her grief.

Ever since their separation, the fire of desire had burned in the lovers' hearts. In Layla's case, however, the flames were concealed and gave no smoke. When a man lies dying, a doctor will often hold a mirror to his mouth to see whether he is still breathing. Layla, too, had her mirror, only for her the mirror was her own soul, which she questioned constantly about her beloved Majnun. There was nothing or no one else in whom she could confide and so, at night, she would tell her innermost thoughts and secrets to her own shadow. On one side there was the ocean of her tears; on the other, the raging fire of her love. Layla stood between them like a *pari*, a spirit who hovers between fire and water.

Although sorrow had bitten through to her very soul, she concealed her grief and would not share it with anyone. Sometimes, when the world lay sleeping, the light of the moon would draw her to the entrance of her tent. There she would stand transfixed, staring at the path, waiting — but for whom? Was she waiting for some messenger to ride by with word of him? Did she expect some well-wisher to bring her beloved's

greetings from afar? Whatever she awaited, it did not come. And so she imagined the breeze to be his messenger, bearing his sighs from the mountains of Najd, while each cloud that brought rain she imagined to be a well-wisher, conveying her lover's greetings like tears from heaven.

But the one thing that did reach her was her lover's verses. His poems were on the lips of every passer-by; even the street urchins in the market-place would recite them in their sing-song voices. Whether he knew it or not, Majnun's voice was being heard by the one he loved, and for this Layla was truly grateful.

Now, beauty was not Layla's only gift, for she, too, had a flair for the poetic art. And so she would commit Majnun's verses to memory as soon as she heard them; then, stringing pearls of wisdom together in ornate rosaries of verse, she would compose her responses. These she would write down on scraps of parchment, heading them with little messages such as: 'The jasmin blossom sends this song to the cypress tree', before casting them to the wind when no one was looking. Sometimes these scraps of verse would be found, and the finder — guessing the hidden meaning — would realise for whom they had been sent and take them to Majnun. To reward the finder, Majnun would compose a poem, which in due course would find its way back to Layla. Many such messages passed between them in this way, allowing them to tear the veil of separation just enough to give them both heart and hope. And others who heard the lovers marvelled at the unity of their voices: so similar were they in tone and

expression that they sounded like a single chant. For theirs were the voices of love, and love is strong enough to break any spell.

Chapter 14

In the garden, the trees were bedecked with smiling blossoms, while yellow roses and vermillion-red tulips fluttered like flags in the breeze. Violets dipped and swayed on their long, curved stems, as though trying to hide from one another. The rose-bush pointed thorny swords skywards, ready for battle, while the water-lily, taking a moment's rest from the fray, threw down her shield on the crystal mirror of the lake. The hyacinth opened her eyes, while the box tree combed its tresses. The blossoms on the pomegranate tree yearned for their own fruit, while the narcissus glowered feverishly, like a lover emerging from a nightmare. The Judas tree stood tall and proud, its veins full of sap, quickened by the sun. The wild-rose bathed her leaves in the jasmine's silver fountain, while the iris raised her lance with pride and determination. And on

the topmost branch of the plane tree, above the cooing turtle doves, sat a nightingale, the Majnun of birds, singing its songs of love.

Layla had come into the garden with her friends to enjoy the birdsong and to play among the flowers like the beautiful maidens who adorn the gardens of paradise. Was it her intention, once their games were over, to seek repose in the shadow of the scarlet roses? Was it her wish to make the green of the grass darker with her own shadow, or raise her cup in the company of the narcissus and the tulip? Or had she come as victor, there to exact tribute from the kingdom of this magnificent garden?

No, she intended none of these things. She intended, once their games had ended, simply to sit and lament, like those whose hearts are torn apart by love. She wanted to converse with the nightingale, to tell that love-sick bird her innermost thoughts and secrets. And maybe the breeze would bring word of the one she loved and mourned ...

She was trying to find comfort in the garden, for she saw it as a mirror of her lover's beauty and nothing more. She even hoped that the mirror might show her the way to the one reflected therein ...

Of all this her friends, of course, knew nothing. For a while they played among the roses, but later, when they sat down to rest in a secluded corner of the garden, Layla walked on and sat down under a tree away from them. Only then could she pour out her grief.

'Dearest heart,' she sighed, 'is it not true that we were created for each other? How noble you are, and

how passionate your heart! How it grieves me to think that our hearts were once as one: now the icy dagger of separation has ripped them apart. If only you could walk through this gate and into the garden; then, my love, our hearts would be as one once more! If only you could sit next to me and look into my eyes; then, my love, you would fulfil my deepest desire. But maybe you have already suffered so much because of me that you no longer wish to have my love, or to look upon the beauty of the garden.'

Suddenly, a voice cut through her dreams. Someone was passing by the garden, a haunting refrain on his lips. It was a stranger, of course, but Layla recognised Majnun's verses immediately. The passer-by sang:

While Layla's garden blooms in spring,
Majnun lies there, suffering.
How can Layla smile and jest,
While love puts Majnun to the test?

When Layla heard these words she began to cry bitter tears, sobbing so heavily that even the hardest of hearts would have been moved. Although she had no idea that she was being watched, one of her friends, noticing Layla's absence, had followed her. Hiding behind a rose-bush, the friend saw everything: Layla's impassioned pleading, her surprise at the verses sung by the passer-by, and her tears.

Later that day, the friend went to Layla's mother and told her what she had seen. Layla's mother began to cry, too, unable to bear the thought of her daughter's

suffering. But what could she do? However hard she tried, she could not think of a way out. 'I must not let Layla do what her heart desires most', she said to herself, 'because Majnun is truly mad and not to be approached. If Layla so much as sees the boy, she, too, will become insane. Yet if I counsel patience, her separation from him may destroy her. And whatever destroys Layla destroys me also.'

And so Layla's pain became her mother's burden, although of course Layla was completely unaware of this. Layla remained silent, and so did her mother.

Chapter 15

Later that same day, as Layla returned with tear-swollen eyes from the garden, she happened to pass by Ibn Salam, a young man from the tribe known as the Banu Asad. Ibn Salam was a man of considerable renown and untold wealth. Respected by all who knew him, he was a strong and generous man upon whom fortune had always smiled — so much so, in fact, that his nickname among his close friends was 'Bakht' (Good Luck). Would such luck continue in his quest for Layla?

Yes, as soon as Ibn Salam caught sight of her as she passed, he knew that he must make her his own. To him she was the full moon in all her splendour — a fitting ornament indeed to adorn the lonely sky of his soul. And so he decided to ask Layla's parents for her

hand. And why not? Did he not have riches in abundance? Was he not of honourable birth? The more he thought about it, the more determined he became to win his beautiful moon, to possess the one shining light that would turn his night to day and make life bearable. The only thing he did not consider was Layla herself, and whether she would surrender herself to him willingly. Apart from this — admittedly the most important thing of all — he had thought of everything. Layla's response was a bridge he would cross when he came to it.

And so, in accordance with Arab custom, Ibn Salam sent one of his most trusted companions as a go-between to ask for Layla's hand. He instructed his mediator to petition Layla's father with much humility, but at the same time to make it quite clear that Ibn Salam was willing to shower them with gold if they complied with his wishes.

And comply they did — in a fashion. They realised that they would be foolish to refuse such an offer, yet it all seemed so sudden, so final. There is no reason, they told each other in private, to give our blessing today when tomorrow will do. And so they neither accepted nor rejected his offer, preferring instead to make him wait a while.

'Of course your wish will be granted,' they said, 'if you are patient. At present, our daughter is weak and sickly — she is like a tender flower caught by a late frost, and thus needs time to grow strong again. See how thin and pale she is! Let her gain strength and then, God willing, we shall agree to the union with

happy hearts. What does it matter if you wait a few more days?'

That was their final word on the subject, and Ibn Salam had no option but to be content and wait.

Chapter 16

The ravine in which Majnun had decided to live lay in an area ruled by a Bedouin prince, Nowfal. His courage and steadfastness on the battlefield had earned him the epithet 'Destroyer of Armies', but although he had the heart of a lion in front of his foes, to his friends he was compassion itself.

One day, Nowfal was out hunting with some of his retainers. They had ventured further than usual into the desert, lured there by the prospect of bagging some particularly handsome antelopes they had been chasing from oasis to oasis. As the swift-footed creatures tried to escape into their mountain hide-outs, Nowfal and his men threw caution to the wind and began to follow them. Just when they were beginning to give up all hope of ever reaching their prey, one of the hunters saw the antelopes disappear into a cave some way above

them. Nowfal told two of his servants to dismount and, armed with bows, arrows and daggers, the three of them set off over the rocks.

Slowly and silently the men tiptoed towards the cave, certain that within minutes the trapped antelopes would be theirs for the taking. But when they reached the entrance to the cave, a strange sight stopped them in their tracks. The antelopes were indeed inside the cave; they were huddled together in the semi-darkness, their eyes wide with fear and their flanks trembling. But they were not alone. For there, crouching behind one of them, was a creature the likes of which Nowfal had never seen before.

The creature was naked, his emaciated limbs cut to ribbons by thorns, his dirty, lank hair hanging to his shoulders. Was it an animal or a human being? Was it a demon from the realm below, come to haunt the world of men, or was it a jinn in human guise? Nowfal was about to reach for his dagger when, to his amazement, the creature started to weep. Turning to his companions, Nowfal whispered, 'Do you have any idea who this wretched creature is?'

'I have heard of him,' said one of the servants. He stepped forward and continued, 'He is a young man whom love has turned insane. He has left the world of men and now lives here in the desert. Day and night he composes sonnets and odes for his beloved. Whenever a cloud passes, he thinks it brings some message from her; whenever a breeze sweeps by, he imagines that it bears her scent. And so he sings his songs of love, hoping that the wind and the clouds will carry his

words back to her.'

'And he lives here all alone?' asked an astonished Nowfal.

'People visit him from time to time,' replied the servant. 'In fact, some travel great distances and suffer untold hardship in order to see him. They bring him food and drink; sometimes they even offer him wine. However, he eats and drinks little — barely enough to keep him alive. And if his visitors do persuade him to sip the wine, he does so only in the name of his beloved. Whatever he says or does is solely for her sake.'

Nowfal listened attentively, his sympathy for Majnun increasing by the minute. All thoughts of hunting had disappeared. 'This poor confused soul is in need of assistance,' whispered Nowfal, 'and I think it would be an act of charity and nobility if I were to help him attain his heart's desire.' And so saying, Nowfal had his servants support Majnun and lead him down to where his other men were waiting. There, he ordered a tent to be set and food to be brought from the nearest oasis. It was time for dinner and Majnun was to be his guest.

Now, Prince Nowfal was a man of great generosity and hospitality, but on this occasion it seemed that even his efforts would be in vain. However much he urged his guest to eat and make merry, the wretched hermit would not even look at the food, let alone eat any of it. Nowfal laughed and joked, but the merrier he became, the less Majnun seemed to understand where he was and what he was doing there. Nowfal tried as hard as

he could to humour him, but Majnun did not respond; with each solicitous word from his host, he would retreat further and further into his own shell. Tired of eliciting no reaction from Majnun, Nowfal decided to let slip the word revealed to him earlier by one of his servants, the one word he knew would have an effect ... the word 'Layla'.

When he heard his beloved's name spoken, Majnun's eyes widened and a smile lit up his face. 'Layla!' he murmured lovingly. 'My dear, sweet Layla!' And then, falteringly, he helped himself to a morsel of meat and took a sip of ruby wine.

Nowfal had cracked the riddle: all he had to do now was speak of Layla, praise her beauty, extol her character, glorify her virtues, and Majnun would respond. And respond he most certainly did. While the silver-tongued Bedouin prince wove garlands of roses with his words of praise, Majnun added to them with the shimmering pearls of his poems. And although his verses were composed without preparation, they were as sweet as honey, as glowing as gold. Nowfal listened in awe and admiration. True, his guest was a wild man, a mere savage, but there could be no doubt that he was also a poet of the highest order, an alchemist of the tongue, a magician of words without equal.

By the end of the evening, Nowfal had reached a decision: he would restore the shattered mirror of this poor man's heart, piece by piece, however long it might take. Addressing his guest, he said, 'You, my friend, are like the moth that flutters around in the darkness, clamouring for the candle flame: take care that you do

not become like the candle, which cries hot tears while consuming itself in its own sorrow. Why have you given up? Why have you abandoned all hope? I have wealth and I have strength. Trust in me and I shall see to it that you receive that which Fate has decreed: Layla shall be yours. I promise this with all my heart. And even if she were to become a bird and escape into God's boundless sky, or a spark of fire inside a flint of rock beneath God's earth, I would seek her out and bring her to you. I shall not rest until I have united you both in marriage.'

Majnun threw himself at Nowfal's feet and praised God for sending him so noble a benefactor. Yet, there was still doubt in his mind when he said, 'Your words still my heart and give me hope, but how do I know that they are not simply words? How can I be sure that you will do what you say, or whether indeed you possess the means to do what you say in the first place? I must tell you now that her parents will not give her in marriage to someone like me, to someone whose insanity is beyond doubt. "What?" they will say. "Are we to abandon this precious, fragile flower and allow her to be carried off by a whirlwind? Are we to let a madman play with a moonbeam? Are we to hand over our daughter to a demon? Never!" Yes, that is what they will say; you do not know them as I do. Others have tried to help me in the past, but in vain. However hard they tried, they could not make my dark fate any lighter. Nothing would sway her mother and father, no amount of gold and silver, of orchards and cattle, could make them change their minds. Thus you can see how

hopeless my case is. Only a miracle could help me; tell me, are you a miracle-worker? I think not. Besides, I imagine that you will soon tire of the quest and turn back when only halfway.

'But I hope not. My prayer is that you will succeed. And if you do succeed, may God reward you. But if the promise you have made is merely idle talk, and if that which you have offered is a mirage rather than a real oasis, then you had better tell me now.'

The young man's frank words served only to increase Nowfal's admiration for him.

'Do you really doubt my word?' Nowfal asked. 'Then, let us make a pact. In the name of God Almighty and His Prophet Muhammad I swear that I shall fight like a lion for you and your cause, sacrificing my life if need be.

'I swear that I shall neither eat nor sleep until you attain that which your heart desires. But you must also promise something: you must promise me that you will practise patience and forbearance. You must try to give up your way of life, tame your wild heart and take it in hand, if only for a few days.

'So, let us agree: you will damp down the fire that rages in your heart; I, for my part, will open the iron gateway to your treasure. Are these terms acceptable to you?'

Majnun agreed. And so, in return for his friend's assistance, he began to quieten the storm that had raged in his heart for so long. Gradually, for the first time in many long months, peace began to seep back into his soul and the wounds inflicted by the sharp blades of his

madness began to heal. Like an innocent child, he placed his complete trust in Nowfal; as tranquillity returned to his spirit, a change came over his whole life. Without further ado, he left the cave and went back with Nowfal to his camp on the edge of the town.

Under the protection of his new benefactor, Majnun no longer deserved to be called 'majnun'. Within days, his madness had gone and he had become Kais again, the strong and handsome young nobleman he once used to be. For the first time in months he took a bath; then he put on the fine turban and robes that Nowfal had prepared for him. His appetite returned and he ate and drank with gusto in the company of friends, reciting his odes and his sonnets to them rather than to the wind and the clouds. Colour flooded back into his pinched, sallow cheeks; once bent like a broken reed, he now stood tall and straight like a firm young sapling. The flower, its petals once scattered by the storm, was in bloom again.

Since he had returned to the world of men, Majnun's view of the world and of nature had also changed. No longer did he ignore the pages of the book of creation that God opened each day before his very eyes. The golden finery of morning brought him delight once more, as though he were witnessing the miracle of dawn for the first time. He matched the midday laughter of the sun with his own beaming smiles, and he became one voice with the birds at evensong. Much to everyone's surprise and delight, Majnun had joined the world of men again.

If Majnun was happy, Nowfal was even happier, for

it was he who had worked this miracle. He was like a spring cloud, sprinkling its showers over the parched earth. Every day, he would bring new gifts for his recuperating friend; nothing was too expensive or extravagant. He kept Majnun by his side at all times, refusing to be parted from him for even an hour. Neither Nowfal nor Majnun had ever known such deep friendship. But as the days turned into weeks, and the weeks into months, storm clouds started to gather on the horizon.

Chapter 17

It was a day like any other day. Majnun and Nowfal were sitting together, relaxed and happy in each other's company, friendly conversation flowing from their lips. Suddenly, Majnun's smile died and his face clouded over. Tears filled his eyes and he started to recite:

The grief in my heart does not move you;
No pain do you feel when I weep.
Of the promises made in abundance,
Not a single one do you keep.
You vowed you would quench my desire,
Yet unyielding were you from the start;
Content to stir love's blazing fire,
And with empty words ravage my heart.

Nowfal sat in unhappy silence, wondering how so bitter a drop could have fallen undetected into the cup of their friendship. What could he say? How was he to respond? He had no weapon against this attack, no words with which to repel this sudden assault. All he could do was lower his eyes to hide the hurt he was feeling.

It was clear that the events of the past few months had done nothing to diminish Majnun's desire for Layla; it burned more fiercely than ever. It did not matter to Majnun how difficult the task was: whatever risks or dangers it involved, Nowfal had given his word and was now duty-bound to carry it out. He had to fulfil what he had promised. Bitterly, Majnun continued: 'How quick you were to make those promises, yet how silent you are now! Are you content to sit there and watch my heart break, while you yourself do nothing? My well of patience has dried up; my stock of reason has run out. If you do not help me, I shall die! Or perhaps I should seek assistance from better friends? I was weak, friendless, broken and dying of thirst for the water of life, and you promised to change all that. Yet you do nothing — nothing, that is, except break your promises. What kind of man are you? Has the Lord not commanded His bondsmen to give food to the hungry, to give water to those who are dying of thirst? Fulfil what you have promised or else this madman shall return to the desert where you found

him. Bring Layla and me together or else I shall put an end to my wretched life!'

Chapter 18

Majnun's words were like flame-tipped arrows; Nowfal's heart was like wax. Nowfal knew that he had to act immediately. Exchanging his robes for a suit of armour, and his goblet for a sword, he went to work without delay. Within the hour, a hundred horsemen — all of them skilled in the art of battle — had been gathered together under Nowfal's banner.

Nowfal rode at the front, his hair streaming in the wind like the mane of lion possessed, and Majnun rode at his side. After a while, they reached the outskirts of the camp where Layla's tribe had pitched their tents. Nowfal ordered his men to dismount and set up camp. Then he sent a herald to the head of Layla's tribe with this message:

'I, Nowfal, hereby state my intention to wage war on you. My troops are assembled and we are ready to fight you to the very last man until we are victorious. There is only one way out for you, and that is if you bring Layla to me; if you refuse to obey, then the sword shall decide between us. I am determined to hand Layla over to the one man who truly loves her, the one man in all the world who is worthy of her. That is my goal.'

A short time later, the herald returned with this reply:

'We have duly taken note of what you have said. Our word on the matter is this: Layla is no plaything to be had at will by whoever so desires. However beautiful the moon may be, it cannot be reached by everyone who falls in love with it. Do you wish to steal what is not rightfully yours? Are you waging war on us for the sake of something to which you have no right? Do you dare to ask the impossible, and then threaten us with death when we deny it you? You demon from hell! Then ride against us, if you will, and put us to the sword, if you are able!'

His anger rising, Nowfal sent a second message:

'You pathetic fools! Are you blind? Do you not see how powerful we are, and how sharp our swords? Do you really think that you can resist us? Can a few, ill-equipped wretches hold back a tidal wave of steel and fury? Come, see reason while you are still able! Do what we ask and spare yourselves, otherwise disaster will overwhelm you!'

But again the herald returned with a rejection that was couched in terms of abuse and derision. Nowfal was fit to burst with rage. Tearing his sword out of its

scabbard, he gave his men the signal to move forwards. Their blades glinting in the sunlight and their fists punching the air, Nowfal's men descended like a flock of hungry vultures on to Layla's camp.

The clash of steel on steel, the terrified whinnying of horses, the shouts and the screams and the blood-curdling cries of the wounded. The thrust of dagger into breast, of spear into thigh, of axe into skull. The sobs of the women and children, huddled together in their tents. The severed limbs, the heads torn from their bodies, the flesh trampled under foot and hoof. The blood running in rivulets, turning the earth below scarlet, purple, black. And everywhere the bittersweet stench of death ...

Among the men, only Majnun did not take part in the fighting. Was not this harvesting of limbs, this massacre, for his sake? Yet he stood to one side, his sword sleeping in its scabbard, and looked on helplessly. His inaction was not out of fear or cowardice; no, it was much more terrible than that. He could not move because he was, quite literally, pulled between the two camps: he was sharing the suffering of both sides. Every blow of the sword, every thrust of the dagger, be it from friend or foe, struck him. Abandoning his weapon, he threw himself into the thick of the fighting, praying to God and imploring the warriors to lay down their arms and sue for peace. But few could hear him, and those who did hear him would not listen. It was a miracle that he was not killed.

Majnun knew that his heart should have been with Nowfal; he knew that Nowfal was fighting for his sake

and that he should have been praying for his benefactor's victory. Yet, as the battle wore on, his mind became more confused. Had he himself not always said that he was ready to die for Layla? Yet here were Layla's menfolk, being killed for his sake. And by whom? By Nowfal and his men — Majnun's own friends!

A shameful thought crept into his mind. Were Nowfal and his men really his friends? Were they not really his friends' enemies? While the battle raged all around him, another battle was taking place in his own soul, every bit as fierce as the one on the field. Majnun reckoned that had shame not immobilised him, he would have drawn his sword against his own side, against Nowfal's men. But that, he said to himself, would have made him infamous in the eyes of Layla's tribe. He could almost imagine the laughter and the jeers of the enemy fighters, entertained by the spectacle of Majnun as he attacked from behind the very men whose goal it was to help him. Nevertheless, had Fate so decreed, he would have gladly fired his arrows against those who were now attacking Layla's tribe. His heart was with the kinsmen of his beloved; even now, he mouthed a silent prayer for their victory.

Finally, these feelings became too strong to subdue. Whenever an enemy horseman advanced, or threw one of Nowfal's men from the saddle, he would cheer; whenever one of Nowfal's men scored a hit, he would howl with dismay.

Eventually, one of Nowfal's men saw how Majnun was behaving, turned to him and said, 'What is wrong

with you, sir? Why do you enjoy the proceedings from afar? And why do you rejoice when the enemy advances? Have you forgotten that we are here on your account? Do you not realise that we are all risking our lives for you?'

'If they really were my enemies,' Majnun replied, 'I would be able to fight them, but they are not. Those people are my friends. In truth, I have no place here. The heart of my beloved beats for the enemy, and where her heart is, that is where I must be. I want to die for her sake; it was never my wish to kill other men. How can I be on your side, when I have given up my soul to her?'

Meanwhile, Nowfal was on the edge of victory. Like a madman unchained, he stormed the enemy walls time and time again, cutting down man after man as he advanced, intoxicated by the scent of glory. Yet as dusk began to fall, the battle was still undecided. Soon, as night threw its veil of black over the burnt shoulders of day and the serpent of darkness swallowed the last pearl of light, the fighters were unable to see each other on the field. Nowfal declared the battle over — for now — and it was agreed, given that there were neither victors nor vanquished, that they would meet again at dawn.

Many brave men had fallen, and the number of wounded was even greater than the number of dead. Yet Nowfal was sure that he would be able to effect one final push and achieve a decisive victory on the following day. But when, as dawn broke, Nowfal was just beginning to round up his men and lead them into

battle, one of his scouts rode into camp with the news that the enemy had been reinforced with troops from other tribes.

Now, Nowfal might have been hot-headed, but he was no fool. After consultation with his men, a decision was reached. They would opt for the only move left open to them. Then he called his herald and sent a message to the enemy camp.

'Enough! Enough of this senseless bloodshed,' the message read. 'It is time to sue for peace. What I desired from you, and what I still desire, is Layla. She is the only one who can break the spell and tear the chains of delusion from Majnun's soul. In return for her, I am ready to pay you camel-loads of treasure. Think long and hard about my proposal. But even if you refuse, we should lay down our arms and make peace. It is the only way.'

No one expected Layla's tribe to comply with Nowfal's request, and when the herald returned with the letter of rejection, no one was surprised. The call for peace, however, was accepted. No more blood was to be shed. Layla was safe with her people, and Nowfal and his men were to return to their own land.

Chapter 19

Majnun rode in silence at Nowfal's side. For an hour they had not exchanged a single word, but finally, when the re-opened wound in Majnun's soul had smarted and stung so much that he could no longer hold his tongue.

'Is this how you help me?' he cried out. 'Is that the only way you know of bringing together two people in love? Is that the last resort of wisdom, to fight with men and weapons? Is that the secret of your power? Is that the proof of your strength? Is that the way you go into action for the sake of your friends? For God knows that I never wanted you to help me in that way; God alone knows that I never asked you to spill blood on my account!

'And now you have succeeded in making enemies of my friends. The door I wished to enter in peace they

have, thanks to you, locked for ever and thrown away the key!

'You have turned my good cause to infamy, all in the name of friendship! You are no friend of mine; I hereby renounce all ties of friendship with you. How can we be friends? I feel like the king in chess who is checkmated by his own knight! I feel like the sheepdog, pierced by the arrow that the shepherd aimed at the wolf!

'True, you may be great when it comes to generosity, but when it comes to fulfilling your promises you are small, very small indeed!'

There was nothing Nowfal could do to defend himself against these words. Gently, he tried to remonstrate with his friend.

'You must understand that we would have been outnumbered: the enemy was superior on every front. That is why I was unable to achieve our goal and win Layla for you. But it is not over yet, believe me. True, I made peace and we departed. But that was a stratagem forced on me by Fate.

'Rest assured, my friend, that I shall return! My aim now is to muster support from the surrounding tribes; I shall gather together an army the likes of which Layla's tribe has never seen! I shall not rest until I have done what I first set out to do. I shall not rest until the treasure you most desire is in your hands.'

And Nowfal did exactly as he said he would. He sent envoys to all of the tribes in the area, from Medina to Baghdad and beyond. With his untold wealth he assembled an army that swelled from horizon to horizon

like a sea of iron. Then, for a second time, he went to war in order to win Layla for his friend.

Chapter 20

Like a vast sea of men and iron, Nowfal's army swept across the plain. The drums of war were beating, the horses' hooves were pounding, and the war-cries of the men were enough to cause a dead man's heart to tremble. Blood-red banners fluttered in the breeze, swords and daggers glinted menacingly in the bright sunlight. At noon, Nowfal's army reached the outskirts of Layla's camp. There, the sea of men and iron became calm — the calm before the coming storm.

Scouts from Layla's tribe had relayed the news of Nowfal's approach back to her camp, and although they knew they were vastly outnumbered, they did not lose heart. They were still determined not to acquiesce, not to give way to force: they were willing to die rather than hand over Layla to the aggressor.

The battle commenced, with fighting more fierce

than either side had ever experienced. The whole plain was soon one vast crush of men and horses; so locked in battle did they become that there was little room to move, and no chance for anyone to escape. And so every thrust of the dagger hit its mark, every swing of the sword found its victim. Blood gushed like ruby wine from a thousand goblets; so red did the sands become that it looked as though countless desert poppies had suddenly bloomed from nowhere.

Finally, the slaughter became too much for even the hardiest of warriors to stomach: many men were beginning to hesitate before they struck, as though tired and ashamed of wounding yet another foe, of taking yet another life. But Nowfal pressed on, spewing fire and destruction like a dragon possessed in the front line. No head was secure from the swing of his club, no heart safe from the thrust of his sword. He moved forward like some scythe of death, mowing down all in his path, never stopping to look back, unaware of the extent of the carnage he and his men had brought about.

As night began to fall, it was clear that the day had been won by Nowfal and his men. Layla's tribe had been well and truly defeated. Many of them had been killed or wounded, and those who had been spared were exhausted beyond description. As a symbolic gesture of surrender and a sign of mourning, the elders of the defeated tribe poured earth over their heads and made their way in silence to the victor's tent. There, they prostrated themselves before Nowfal and cried, 'O, Nowfal! Today the victory is yours and we have tasted a bitter defeat. Now, for the sake of God, let

justice reign! Let those of us who have survived this bloodbath live in peace. Allow us to rise after our fall, remembering that soon we shall all be summoned to rise once more before Him on the Day of Judgement. Lay down your arms, for you no longer need them: we are defenceless men who wish you no ill. Put your spears and arrows away; you have no use for them now. We, for our part, have thrown down our shields and placed our fate in your hands. For the love of God, have mercy.'

Nowfal was moved by the elders' speech and, for a while, he was unable to reply. He, too, was ready to forget all that had happened and put the past to rest. Solemnly he agreed to a truce, but not without mentioning his price: 'I have listened to what you have said and I agree that peace is our only solution. Therefore, I agree to a truce. Now I shall depart, but before I leave I must ask for that which I have won from you here today. Bring me Layla — only then shall I be satisfied and leave you be.'

Just as he finished speaking, a man stepped forward from the defeated tribe and approached Nowfal. It was Layla's father, his back bent low by grief and humiliation. Slowly, he knelt down in front of Nowfal, prostrated himself in the dust at the victor's feet and began to sob. 'O Nowfal! You are the pride of all Arabs and a prince among men! I am an old man — an old man whose heart is broken and whose back has been bent low by the vicissitudes of time. Disaster has brought me to my knees; grief has pushed me to the edge. Blame and infamy are being heaped upon me as

we speak, and when I think of the blood that has been shed because of me, I wish that God's earth would open up and swallow me whole. It is now for you to decide. If you spare me my daughter, then the gratitude is mine. If you wish to kill her, then kill her! Slit her throat with your dagger, thrust your sword into her heart, trample her body into the dust under the hooves of your horse if you will. I shall not question your decision.

'But there is one thing I can never accept. Never, while I am her father, shall my daughter be given to this lunatic, to this demon in human guise, to this madman, this 'majnun' — never! To be sure, he should be shackled with chains of iron and locked away, not tied with bonds of marriage and set free!

'After all, what is he? He is a fool, a common vagrant and vagabond, a homeless, good-for-nothing tramp who roams the mountain wastes like a filthy hermit possessed by Satan and his minions. Is he fit to sit with other humans, let alone take a wife? Am I to have as a son-in-law some perfidious poet who has dragged my name through the dirt? There is not one corner in the whole of Arabia where my daughter's name is not part of some sick little verse on the lips of common people. And you, in all seriousness, ask me to hand my daughter over to him? My name would be dirt for ever, my honour soiled beyond redemption. You are asking the impossible, sir, and I beg you to desist. Why, I would rather cut off her head with my own sword than give her to Majnun: it would be like feeding my own child to a lion. It is better that she die a quick

death by my sword than be placed in the jaws of a dragon like Majnun!'

For a second, the audacity of the old man's polemic and the violence of his threats stunned Nowfal into silence. Yet he bore no resentment towards the bent figure in the dust before him. Firmly, but politely, he replied, 'Stand up, old man! Even though I have the upper hand, I do not intend to take your daughter by force. A woman taken by force is like food without salt: I shall take her from you only if you give her willingly.'

Nowfal's aides and advisers agreed with him. If Majnun could not have Layla, he had only himself to blame. After all, the whole thing was Majnun's doing; the blame for the bloodshed was his. And had he not, during the first encounter, taken the side of the enemy and acted treacherously towards those who were fighting for his sake? The very same horseman who had berated Majnun for his behaviour during that first battle now stepped forward and addressed Nowfal.

'The old man is right,' he said. 'This fool, Majnun, is a slave to lust. Thoughts of disobedience and rebellion dominate his whole being and he is in no fit state to ask for anyone's hand in marriage. He is clearly of unsound mind and is not to be trusted. Did we not risk our lives on his account? Were we not ready to fight to the death? In spite of all that, his hope was that the enemy would emerge victorious! On his behalf we presented our bodies as targets for their arrows — arrows that he, in secret, was blessing! No sane man acts in such a way. Look at him, see how he laughs

without reason and cries with no excuse! Even if he were to win Layla, Fate would not bless their union. The man has no redeeming qualities and you, Nowfal, will live to regret ever having come to his aid. The honour and shame so far apportioned are enough: let us cut our losses now and wash our hands of the whole affair.'

What was Nowfal to do? Layla's father was inexorable even in defeat; he even enjoyed the support of Nowfal's men. And given that his own mind was filled with doubts concerning Majnun, Nowfal could hardly blame them.

And so he decided. Electing to withdraw his request for the spoils of victory, Nowfal signalled to his men to break camp and depart.

Chapter 21

Majnun was unable to suppress his anger for long, and they had not travelled far before he turned to Nowfal and began to shout, 'Do you call yourself a friend? You nurtured my hopes and made them strong like a tree, and now you fell that tree with your own axe. The spoils of victory were yours for the taking. Layla was as good as yours, and thus mine: why did you let her go? Why promise to help me, then turn against me?

'I was like a man dying of thirst: you led me to the banks of the Euphrates and then, before I could drink, you pulled me away and led me back to the scorching heat of the waterless desert wastes! You led me to the table, but you would not let me eat! Why, if you never intended to let me have my treasure, did you show it to

me in the first place?'

Majnun tugged at the reins of his horse and, without taking his leave, galloped off across the sands and into the wilderness. Soon he had disappeared from sight, leaving Nowfal and his men to scratch their heads in amazement.

A few days after Nowfal had returned to his own land, he formed a search party and went to look for his friend. He was, after all, devoted to Majnun. He wanted to find his friend, to comfort him and tell him how much he loved him, and to reassure him that it had never been his intention to hurt him.

But of Majnun there was no trace. It was as if he had disappeared completely from the face of the earth. It was as if his name had been erased from the book of life. Gradually, Nowfal came to the painful conclusion that he had lost his friend for ever.

Chapter 22

Having left Nowfal, Majnun was like a motherless child. He mounted his horse and galloped off deep into the desert, the wind his only companion now. In a voice cracked by grief, he sang to himself of Nowfal's infidelity, recounting his fate to the abandoned camp-fires and deserted caravanserais as he went.

Suddenly, he saw something moving in the distance; as he approached he saw that it was two gazelles, caught in a trap. And there was a hunter standing above them, his dagger drawn, ready for the kill. Majnun felt the anger rise in his chest.

'Let those poor beasts alone!' he cried. 'I am a stranger to these parts and so I am your guest here; it is not fitting for a host to refuse the request of those who call on him! Now, remove the nooses from their necks

and set them free! Is there not room enough in this world for all of God's creatures? What is their crime, that you are ready to slaughter them? Look how elegant they are, how beautifully they have been created! Do they not remind you of spring itself? Do their soulful eyes not remind you of the eyes of your beloved?

'Let them go! Leave them alone to live in peace! Their necks are too fine to suffer the blows of your sword; their breasts and thighs were not created to fill your pot; their backs, which have never carried any load, are surely not destined for the fire! Let them go, I beg you!'

The hunter stood back, astonished. Never in his life had he heard a plea for clemency so impassioned, so noble. Still shaking his head in disbelief, he said, 'Well, what can I say? I understand your point of view and I agree with you.

'But I am a poor man; were it not for my poverty, I would never stoop to slaughtering God's creatures. But this is the first catch I have had in two months. I have a wife and several small mouths to feed. Am I to sacrifice the well-being of my family for the freedom of a few animals?'

Majnun dismounted and, with not so much as a word, handed the reins of his horse to the hunter. Perplexed by Majnun's behaviour, but more than happy with the exchange, the hunter rode off, leaving Majnun to untie the fettered gazelles. Tenderly he took them out of the trap, stroked their necks and kissed their eyes, saying:

I see her eyes in yours, darker than night;
Yet mere likeness cannot restore her to my sight.
For what I have lost no one can return,
And all that is left are the memories that burn ...

Invoking God's blessings on the animals, he released them and watched as they trotted off across the sands. Then he continued on his way, only at a much slower pace this time, bent almost double by the weight of his grief and his few possessions.

The sun beat him mercilessly about the head with her burning stick, while the sand roasted his feet. His skin was scorched, his brain seemed to be on the boil, his feet were blistered and shredded by thorns, but he carried on unperturbed. He carried on until the night threw its indigo cloak over the earth, and the moon, borrowing the sun's light, became a huge all-seeing eye in the sky above. Only then did he rest.

Panting and groaning, he crept into a cave and made a bed with his old shawl for a blanket and a rock for a pillow. Then he lay down and, struggling for sleep, he read awhile from the book of his own life, the pages of which were blacker than night itself.

Chapter 23

As morning unfurled her banner of light and the sun scorched a hole in night's coal-black veil, the sleep demons unchained Majnun's mind and returned it to him, allowing him to wake.

Rubbing his eyes, he emerged from the cave and continued on his way, composing his odes and his quatrains and singing them aloud to himself and the desert.

Towards evening, Majnun came across another hunter. The man had trapped a stag in a snare and was just about to slit its throat.

His blood set to boil, Majnun ran towards the hunter and screamed, 'You monster of a tyrant! You shameful oppressor of the weak and the defenceless! Let this creature go so that it may spend what is left of its life in peace!

'Have you no thought for this poor creature's companion? For its offspring, waiting for their father to return? What would the poor hind say if she could speak? She would curse you; she would ask God to make you suffer as you have made her companion suffer.

'Does the distress of those you torture mean nothing to you? Put yourself in the stag's place; imagine yourself as the victim in the snare and the stag as the hunter, about to kill you. What would you feel, then?'

'I do not kill for the sake of killing,' said the hunter, lowering his dagger. 'I kill in order to survive, in order to put food on the table. If you wish, I am ready to sell the stag to you.'

Majnun had neither money nor jewellery, but he did have the few things that Nowfal had given him. He took them out of his bag and handed them to the hunter, who was quite satisfied with the exchange. Stuffing them into his sack, he patted the stag on the back, smiled at Majnun and set off over the dunes.

When the hunter had gone, Majnun went over to the stag and began to stroke it gently, like a father caressing his child. Then he began to whisper into its ear:

'You are like me, separated from the one you love. Never mind, for your sorrows are over. Now you can return to her and sleep in her shadow, where you belong. And if, as you return to your beloved, you should encounter mine on the way, give her this message from me:

Every breeze that blows brings your scent
to me;
Every bird that sings calls out your name
to me;
Every dream that appears brings your face
to me;
Every glance at your face has left its trace
with me.
I am yours, I am yours, whether near or far;
Your grief is mine, all mine, wherever you are.'

With these words, Majnun untied the stag and set it free. Then he watched it as it hurried off into the distance, anxious to rejoin its mate.

High above, the caravan of night had returned from its travels; in the eastern sky, the moon emerged from the darkness and began to bathe the desert in its hypnotic silver light. Majnun looked up to the sky like a bird with injured wings, unable to fly. Then he stared at the stars and, with tears in his eyes, pondered his fate.

Chapter 24

Dawn cast its ochre light over the indigo dome of night, while the sun, awakened from its slumber, painted fresh red roses on the horizon.

But Majnun, wearied by grief and the pain of separation, resembled a flower in autumn, its sepals withered, its petals yellow and fading and set to fall.

When the sun reached its zenith and began to roast him, Majnun was relieved to find a small, palm-fringed oasis with a bubbling stream where he could rest awhile. Water and trees and shade! This place, thought Majnun, is a small part of Heaven fallen down to earth!

He drank from the cool, sweet stream until his thirst subsided; then he lay down on the velvet-soft carpet of grass in the shade of the palms. Within minutes he had drifted into a deep, sweet sleep. Slowly his cares dissolved, his worries melted away,

and he began to dream.

When he woke, the sun was already sinking low in the west. How long had he been asleep? It had seemed but minutes, yet the fading light and the approaching cold told a different tale.

As he pondered the mysteries of sleep, trying to work out how so much time could have passed unnoticed, Majnun was suddenly gripped by the feeling that he was not alone, that someone or something had been watching him as he lay sleeping. Surely he must be mistaken — after all, he thought, apart from me there is no living thing for miles around.

And then he saw it. High up among the leaves of the topmost branch of the palm in whose shade he had been sleeping, a dark shadow arrested his gaze. There, motionless in the greenery, sat a huge, coal-black raven, its eyes glittering like diamonds.

He, too, has donned his mourning robes, thought Majnun. Like me, he has taken to the wilderness to be alone with his grief. Majnun cleared his throat and called out to the bird, 'Hey, you with the black cloak! Whom do you mourn? Why do you wear the colours of night in the full light of day? Tell me, are you grieving on my account?'

Starting at this sudden cry, the bird hopped on to another branch, its lamp-like eyes fixed on Majnun. Majnun continued, 'If you, like me, are one of those whose hearts have been torn in two by love, why do you shun me? Or maybe you are dressed in black because you are a preacher, ready to mount the pulpit in order to deliver your sermon. Is that it?

'Then again, it could be that you are a Negro guard, here to watch my every move. If that be the case, why are you afraid? Perhaps I am a King and you are the knight sent to protect me.

'Whatever you are, listen well: if, while you are on the wing, you should meet the one I love, tell her this from me.'

And Majnun began to recite:

Rescue me from this well of loneliness,
For my life's light fades in this wilderness.
'Don't be afraid, for I am yours!' you said;
If that be true, come now — or let them find
me dead.
Once trapped, the dying lamb hears all too late
The heartfelt cries of 'Wolf!' that would prevent
its fate.

As Majnun came to the end of his verse, the raven hopped further and further away to the tip of the branch. Then, with a frenzied flapping of wings, he took off from the crown of the palm and soared away. Soon he had vanished from sight, swallowed up by the encroaching blackness of night.

The day was done; the night had come. Bats wheeled and swooped as twilight faded and darkness swelled. Soon the sky was darker than a raven's coat; indeed, the night itself was like a raven, ink-black and foreboding. And as the monstrous bird of night spread its wings across the heavens, diamond-like eyes stared down once more at Majnun — now he saw not a single

pair but a hundred thousand, large and small, near and far, shining in cold splendour above his head. To escape their gaze, Majnun covered his face with his hands.

Then, he sat down and wept.

Chapter 25

The morning light was like a sharp knife, cutting through the veil of night. Slowly the old earth found new life again, born afresh like a vast flower emerging from the bud.

Majnun rushed onwards, his feet scarcely touching the ground. It was as though he had suddenly sprouted wings and could fly; he was like a moth that dances through the darkness towards the flame it wishes to make its own. But Majnun was aflame before he had reached the candle of his desires; his separation from Layla was a pain that he could no longer bear; it was a fire that had consumed his very being.

The nearer he came to his goal, the more intoxicated his soul became with Layla's scent, the more distinctly his ears seemed to hear her voice, the more clearly his eyes perceived her image in everything

he saw — in the mountains, the valleys, the rocks, the shifting sands.

Before long, he had become so fatigued that he was forced to stop for rest. Within minutes, he felt as though he was a corpse now resurrected: with every breath, every sigh, he felt the life force stream back into his tired limbs.

He had not been resting long when he saw two figures approaching. A man, chained and bound, his emaciated body clad in filthy rags and his hair and beard dishevelled, was being dragged along by a woman. The wretched captive was clearly out of his mind; every now and then the woman would yank his chains and beat him with her stick, hurrying him along like some worn-out beast of burden, causing him to yell out in distress.

Deeply shocked at the spectacle, Majnun ran forward to the couple and made a grab for the woman's stick. 'For pity's sake,' he cried, 'leave the poor wretch be! What has he done to deserve such inhumane treatment? He may be crazy, he may be a criminal, but whatever he is, he is still a human being and you have no right to punish him in this manner.'

The woman replied, 'Do you really want to know the truth? Then listen well. This man is not crazy; nor is he a criminal. I am a poor widow and he is a dervish, a "fool of God", and both of us have suffered great hardship. We are both of us ready to do anything that will make money enough to put a crust of bread on our table.

'And so I parade him around in chains; that way,

everyone thinks that he is mad. People take pity on us — on him for being mad, and on me for having to bear so heavy a burden — and they give us money out of the goodness of their hearts. Whatever we earn, we split between us.'

Majnun sank to his knees in the dust and began to plead with her: 'For the love of God, take the chains from this poor man's hands and feet and put them on me, for I should be tied up, not he! You see, I am truly mad!

'Yes, I am one of those unfortunate wretches whose minds have been destroyed by love. Tie me up and take me with you! Parade me in chains instead of him and everything that you earn shall be yours to keep; money does not interest me in the least.'

The woman did not need to think twice about Majnun's offer. Ripping the chains from the hands and feet of the dervish, she tied Majnun up in his place. Taking their leave of the dervish, the woman yanked on Majnun's chains and dragged him away, a happy smile on her lips. Majnun, for his part, was overjoyed, and every blow of the woman's stick upon his bare back was like a lover's caress.

The woman and her new prisoner moved from oasis to oasis, stopping at each tent they passed. Majnun would sit in the dust and recite his love poems, each dedicated to Layla, pummelling his face with his fist or dancing around like a drunken bear while the woman beat him with her stick.

At one particular oasis, at the edge of the stream, Majnun saw a tent which seemed familiar to him.

Edging towards it, he saw to his astonishment that it was Layla's tent.

Suddenly his eyes burst like spring clouds, sending showers of tears down his cheeks. He sank to the ground, pounded his head against the hard earth and cried out, 'Why did you leave me? Why did you leave me alone and share nothing with me but your grief?

'Look what has become of me! I am doing penance because I made you and your people suffer at the hands of Nowfal. To atone for my sin, I have given up my freedom and now here I stand, chained and bound, waiting to be punished. I know that I have done wrong, and that the burden of my sin is so great that I will never be forgiven.

'I am your captive; you must be my judge. Condemn me, if you will; punish me with the severest punishment you can think of.

'I am to blame for the suffering that you and your people have endured; it is my fault entirely. Do you think I do not know this? Can you not see that this is why I am chained and bound and beaten black and blue? I have confessed to my crime and now I am here in chains to suffer punishment at your hands. So imprison me, torture me, kill me if you must — but do not reject me!

'While I lived, I lived for your greetings, but they did not reach me. While I lived, I lived for the touch of your hand upon my face, but you were always out of reach. But now — now that my life is over — there is hope!

'Maybe now, as you kill me with your arrow, you

will look at me! Maybe now you will touch me, if only to bare my neck before you sever my head from my body with your sword! I am not afraid of death: what do I have to fear, if you are my executioner? Why should I tremble if it is your sword that is to cut off my head?

'My heart is a candle: trim the wick and it will only burn brighter! While I live, all roads to you are blocked, so why should I not embrace death willingly? Come, save yourself from me, and me from myself, and let me rest at your feet in eternal peace and everlasting tranquillity!'

There was nothing more he could say. With a heart-rending cry he shot up from the ground like an arrow, his face contorted with rage. Like a man possessed by demons he grasped his chains with both hands and, strengthened by some unknown force, tore them from his limbs and tossed them into the sand. Then he ran. He ran away from the old woman, from Layla's tent, from the oasis, from all human beings, and headed for the mountainous desert wastes of Najd.

One by one his friends and relatives were told: all were saddened by the news, but few of them were surprised. Majnun's behaviour had been worrying them for some time, but what could they have done? A meeting was held and a party of Majnun's relatives was sent off to search for him. When eventually they found him, high up in one of his most isolated retreats, they realised that the only thing he remembered was Layla and his love for her; the rest of his past was erased. As soon as they tried to jog his memory by mentioning the

names of friends and relatives, people and places he had known, he would fall silent or close his eyes, as though he was too exhausted to think. All attempts to get through to him, to make him see sense, failed miserably; in the end, his relatives gave up and headed back to the town. Others tried to reach him, but with little success, and in the end even his father and mother had to abandon hope that he would ever return.

Chapter 26

It was her father who told Layla of Nowfal's victory. He came running into her tent, his robes spattered with blood, his turban askew. He was exhausted, of course, yet strangely enough there was triumph in his voice. Layla tended to his cuts and bruises while he told her what had happened.

The old man slapped his thigh and said proudly, 'What a coup! What a stroke of genius! I have done the impossible: I have tamed this wild creature Nowfal with my tongue; within minutes of the defeat he inflicted upon us, I showed him who the real victor is! And now I have escaped disaster, and all by a hair's breadth!

'As for that maniac, that crazed demon Majnun — if he had forced his way in, as indeed he was trying to

do, he would have ruined everything. Never mind. Although Nowfal has won fairly and squarely — and why not, since he fought sincerely in the name of God — thanks to my diplomacy, he has withdrawn and we are saved.'

Layla listened, smiling and nodding in all the right places, but her heart was breaking. She felt that she would die of grief before long, but of course she could not reveal her feelings.

Day in and day out she suffered in silence, feigning smiles and laughter and responding as expected when she was spoken to, but as soon as night fell she would take to her bed and cry, safe from prying eyes, until there were no tears left to shed.

Her parents' home had become her prison; no, it had become her tomb, for was she not as good as dead? She guarded the secret of her love as jealously as a serpent guards treasure, but secrecy had its price. The fact that there was no one in whom she could confide made her feel like a bird in a trap: she was tired of her suffering and longed for release, even if that release meant certain death.

And while she suffered in silence, she waited, listening to the murmurs of the wind, hoping that it would bring her a message from her beloved.

Meanwhile, Majnun's sonnets and odes extolling Layla and her unparalleled beauty had spread throughout the land; so famous had his poetry made her that before long, suitors were flocking from all corners of the land to ask for her hand. Some offered orchards and sheep, others gold and silver. Intoxicated by the

very sight of her, they resorted to every trick and stratagem they could in order to reach their goal. Yet, however skilled they were in the fine arts of persuasion, their efforts were all in vain: no amount of land or sheep, of gold or silver, could sway Layla's father. To him, she was a precious diamond that was to be preserved with tenderness and loving care; to him, she was a casket of gems whose key was not to be given away lightly. Layla, for her part, was touched by his paternal solicitude and showed her gratitude for his concern with smiles and affection. But her smiles were the smiles of a candle that shines through waxen tears; hers were the smiles of the rose that hides its thorns.

News of the comings and goings of Layla's suitors soon reached Ibn Salam, who was outraged by the thought of so many grubby hands reaching out for his promised jewel. His patience tested and his passion inflamed, he could bear it no longer. With great speed he equipped a caravan worthy of a sultan: fifty donkeys, each loaded with amber and frankincense, musk and myrrh, and enough sweetmeats to feed an entire army. His camels, barely visible under their loads of rich cloth, looked like moving mountains of silk and brocade. Ibn Salam, for his part, was dressed like a King, and as the caravan moved from oasis to oasis, he showered the people with gold.

Setting up camp near the oasis where Layla and her clan had their tents, Ibn Salam allowed himself and his retinue a day of rest before sending his mediator to Layla's family. This mediator was a man of great eloquence, skilled in the art of rhetoric. He could weave

a spell with words; so effective was his speech that he could melt the iciest of hearts; such was his discourse that he could have raised the dead with the power of his logic and the force of his argument.

Such dogged determination on the part of Ibn Salam's mediator was hard to resist; even harder to resist was the seemingly endless stream of gifts that Ibn Salam had brought with him. Spices from India, carpets from Persia, rich brocades from China, perfumes from Byzantium — each gift designed, no doubt, to sweeten the bitter pill of Ibn Salam's request and to help open the lock that was, thanks to the key of his mediator's sweet tongue, half open already.

The mediator began to charm Layla's father: 'Ibn Salam is no ordinary man. He is a veritable lion, the pride of all Arabs! He has the strength of ten of the strongest men and he is the backbone of any army.

'But he is not only a master of the sword, for wherever he goes he is obeyed. Wherever he steps, his fame precedes him. His nobility is without question, his honour and integrity are without flaw. His wrath is without parallel: if need be, he will shed blood as though it were water. His munificence is the stuff of legends: if necessary, he will shower gold as though it were sand.

'Can you afford not to accept such a man as your son-in-law? If you are in need of trustworthy men, he will find them for you. If you are in need of protection, he will grant it.'

Like the showers of spring, the mediator's words rained down on Layla's father, hardly giving him the

chance to reply. What was he to do? What was he to say?

Had he not already promised his daughter to Ibn Salam? Events were happening too fast and he would have preferred to wait a little longer, but the fact remained that he had made a promise on which he could not renege. He searched for some excuse, some loophole, some way out, but there was none. He was like a man who, suddenly surprised by an enemy, searches in vain for the nearest weapon with which to defend himself, only to find none.

And all the time he was being driven further and further into the corner by the silver-tongued artistry of his opponent. Eventually, he gave in and a date was set for the wedding.

When the wedding day finally dawned, the sun cast its veil of light over the shoulders of night, as one casts a veil over a bride. Layla's father rose early, eager to set the wedding preparations in motion; by noon, everything was ready.

Ibn Salam, his party and the other guests were led into a pavilion that had been erected specially for the wedding celebrations. In time-honoured tradition, the guests were sitting together, admiring the bride's presents, throwing showers of gold and silver into the air, enjoying the fine foods and cementing new ties of brotherhood and friendship. Laughter filled the air and all felt at peace with the world.

But what of Layla? She sat in the bridal chamber, surrounded by chattering women and squealing children.

The women had adorned the walls of the room with

silks and tapestries and were now burning frankincense in brass bowls, its bittersweet fragrance filling the room. So engaged were they in their preparations that they did not notice Layla's tears.

Among all these happy, smiling people, she alone was sad. Icy daggers of loneliness and desperation were piercing her very soul; never before had she felt so terribly alone. How close she and Majnun had been to their goal ... and now everything was lost: just as the goblet had touched their lips it had smashed, spilling the wine of happiness on to the sand.

No one could read Layla's thoughts; no one had the slightest inkling of the storms that were raging in her heart. Can a runner see the thorn which makes him limp? Even if she had dared to reveal the extent of her unhappiness, her family would not have understood. And she was determined to say nothing. What good could have come of it? Those who rebel against their tribe will lose that tribe; a finger bitten by a snake must always be cut off and discarded.

Life is built on the harmony and equilibrium of all its elements: whenever this harmony is disturbed, death creeps in and does its worst. And however happy she tried to appear on the surface, there could be no denying that death had already appeared in Layla's heart and was now biding its time, ready to turn her soul into a tomb.

Chapter 27

The ship of night carried its cargo of shining stars down the Tigris river of the sky while the sun pitched her golden tent on the blue meadow of heaven. Morning had arrived.

Ibn Salam, the happiest of men, gave his caravan the signal to begin the long journey home. His donkeys and camels set off at a brisk pace, for they were returning without their loads. And although Ibn Salam had spent a veritable fortune on gifts for his bride's family, he did not regret it for a second. After all, was not the most precious, the most priceless treasure in the universe now his?

The litter that had been prepared for Layla was as sumptuous on the inside as it was ornate on the outside. Borne aloft by camels and tended by footservants and flunkeys, Layla was treated like a princess: she was

told that during the journey she had only to clap her hands and the caravan would be brought to a halt so that she might get out to stretch her legs; she had only to cough and enough iced sherbet would be brought to quench the thirst of an army; she had only to yawn and a pavilion of pure silk would be erected so that she might sleep. But she desired none of these things.

When they finally arrived at Ibn Salam's camp, he turned to her and said, 'Dearest heart, everything here belongs to you. What is mine is yours: my kingdom lies at your command.'

And Layla's response? Well, suffice to say that her response was such that Ibn Salam's happiness quickly began to cloud over; his heart, which had once shone like the sun with joy, now became veiled with a darkness that seemed to intensify with each passing day. She would not eat, she could not sleep, and she would not allow him into her bed. What was this? For so long he had pursued her and now, now that the treasure was almost in his grasp, the key to the casket was denied him. His trusted courtiers counselled patience and forbearance. And hope. He tried as hard as he could to please her, if only to understand why she was refusing to please him, but it was in vain. Nothing could be read in his dear wife's eyes but tears, and each night that fell found him sleepless and alone.

So frustrated did Ibn Salam become that he thought he might even take her by force. After all, he asked himself, is she not my wife? Is it not my right? Who knows, perhaps that is what she expects? And so he stopped trying to win her over with kindness and

resorted to more forceful action. But again he failed. In trying to pluck the fruit, he only scarred his hands on the thorn; in his rush to savour the sweetness, the only thing he was allowed to taste proved more bitter than wormwood. For as soon as he reached out his hand to touch her, Layla sank her teeth into his arm and scratched at his face until both of them were covered in his blood.

'I swear to God that if you try that once more,' she cried, 'you will regret it for the rest of your life — that is, for what is left of your life! I have promised my Creator that I will not submit to your demands. You can slit my throat with your sword, if you like, but you cannot take me by force!'

There was nothing Ibn Salam could do. Deeply in love with her, he did not want to go against her wishes. He said to himself, 'Even if she is not in love with me, at least she is here in my home. True, I may look but I must not touch. So be it! I would rather be allowed to look but not touch than not have her here with me at all. At least I can gaze upon her beautiful face whenever I wish.'

Then he knelt beside her, took her hand and said humbly, 'Forgive me, my darling. I beg only to be allowed to look at you; to ask for more would be theft, and I am no common thief.'

But although Layla agreed, allowing Ibn Salam only to look at her whenever he wished, not once did she return his looks. While his eyes sought hers, her eyes sought only Majnun. She listened to the murmurs of the wind in case it brought news from him; she

watched the sunbeams dance in case a single mote that had been in his presence might come her way, bearing his scent. Sometimes, she would throw back the curtains at the entrance to her tent and look out at the night sky; then her soul would escape for a while and she would forget herself. Her hours were filled with thoughts of Majnun and she lived in hope of receiving a message from him. One day soon, she would say. One day soon ...

Chapter 28

Majnun knew nothing of Layla's marriage to Ibn Salam; even after an entire year had passed, he was none the wiser. Love had turned him into a blind and drunken nomad, stumbling from place to place with no idea where he was going. Sorrow had emaciated him and sallowed his skin, and he grew worse by the hour. But for a sickness such as his — the sickness of love — there was no cure.

One evening saw him lying, exhausted as always, beneath the overhanging blossoms of a thorn-bush. He did not see the rider approach him, nor did he hear the rider's camel, until he was almost upon him. The rider, a swarthy man in a coal-black cloak, dismounted and stood towering above Majnun like some monstrous black demon. His voice was as intimidating as his appearance. He kicked Majnun in the shin and boomed:

'Hey, you there! Your idolatry has cut you off from the world and left you unaware of what is happening. But let me tell you this: you have dedicated your heart to Layla in vain. You idiot! Did you really expect her to remain faithful? Did you really think that she would wait? Do you still hope for light where there is only darkness?

'How you fool yourself! The shining beacon of innocence and love that you think you perceive from afar is but an illusion, a trick of the light. Her love for you exists only in your imagination; in her eyes you are nothing!'

Majnun opened his mouth to speak but the stranger cut in, louder and more harshly this time.

'You poor misguided fool! Don't you realise that she has deceived you? You have given your heart to her, and she has given her heart to the enemy!

'She has forgotten you, Majnun, and she has scattered her memories of you to the wind. For she has been given in marriage to another man — a marriage that she was only too glad to accept. Now her thoughts are all for him, for his kisses, his lovemaking, the warmth of his loving arms, the hardness of his rugged body, the beauty of his hidden treasure!

'She is forever lost in thoughts of pleasures of the flesh while you are lost in your own grief and suffering. Can that be right? Can that be fair?

'Look at the ever-widening gulf that separates you and judge for yourself: why should you go on caring for her when it is clear that she no longer cares for you?'

Majnun felt as though a thousand serpents had buried their fangs in his soul. He opened his mouth to cry out for mercy, but the black demon continued.

'Women are women, Majnun. Did you really expect her to be any different? They are all alike, fickle and capricious, two-faced and duplicitous. She is like the rest of her sex, and the rest of her sex are like her.

'Yesterday, you were a hero in her eyes; today, you are the devil in disguise! Yesterday, you were her everything; today, you are nothing. True, women have passions as we do, but theirs are pursued solely out of self-interest: there is hypocrisy and deceit in everything they do.

'Shame on you for trusting her in the first place! Can one ever trust a woman? Trust a woman and she will repay your trust with torture. And you will have only yourself to blame!

'Why? Because a man who trusts a woman deserves to be tortured; a man who trusts a woman and believes that she will remain faithful is more stupid than she is, and thus deserves to suffer!

'After all, what is a woman anyway? A woman is nothing but a cesspit of falsehood and vanity, viciousness and mendacity.

'True, on the surface she is a haven of tranquillity; dig deeper, however, and you find a churning maelstrom of trouble and turmoil. As your enemy, she corrupts the whole world and turns it against you; as your friend, she corrupts your own soul. If you say "Do this!", you can be certain that she will not do it; if you say "Don't do this!", you can be certain that she will go

to the ends of the earth to do it! When you suffer, she is happy; when you are happy, she is in hell. That is how women are, my friend, and you would do well to remember it.'

As the dark stranger's words came to an end, a terrible moan of despair rose from the depths of Majnun's soul. He fell back and, as he fell, his head hit a rock so hard that blood sprayed like a fountain and coloured the sand beneath him bright crimson. He lay there unconscious, his lips still rounded in a silent scream.

Whether man or jinn, the rider felt pity for Majnun. Somewhat ashamed of the effect of his words on the madman, he crouched next to the crumpled body until Majnun regained consciousness.

Then, in a voice much softer than before, he started to beg Majnun's forgiveness: 'Please listen to me, I implore you! Everything I told you was a lie. It was a sick joke, nothing more. Layla has neither deceived nor betrayed you. And she has most certainly not forgotten you. How could she?

'As for her husband, well, he is her husband in name alone: they have been married a whole year and not once has she let him near her.

'Yes, she is married to him, but she remains faithful to you, and to you alone. She has confined herself to her tent and there she suffers, nursing a broken heart and longing only for you. She has no one else in the whole world, and not a single second passes when she does not think of you and your love for her.

'How could she forget you? Even if you were

separated by a thousand years, she would not forget you!'

Majnun listened with rapt attention to the stranger's words. But was he telling the truth? They were the very words he wanted to hear, but were they spoken in sincerity? Yet, how they soothed his aching heart!

He began to weep and, as he sat there in the dust with tears streaming down his cheeks, he looked like a little lost boy, like a tiny bird whose wings have been broken by sticks and stones. There was nowhere he could go, nothing he could do. Even the verses that flowed from his lips seemed futile. What good are verses, he thought, when the one for whom they are meant is never likely to hear them?

Chapter 29

Majnun dragged himself along like a wounded animal. Grief had emaciated him; there was hardly a breath of life left in his whole body. The only picture in his mind was that of Layla; it was her face that he saw whenever he closed his eyes, and it was her image that remained whenever he opened them.

He longed to speak to her, but how? Knowing that he would never be able to recite his verses to her in person, he engaged the wind as his messenger. As he sang his haunting songs of love, the wind carried his words away ... but without response.

The wine of unrequited love is as bitter as wormwood, but so great was Majnun's passion that he could not refuse to drink. And as he drank, so his verses continued to flow:

You are the cause of my lingering death,
yet while I live,
My passion for you grows, and I forgive.
You are the sun while I am the star of night:
You rise and put to shame my waning light.
Your eyes are the envy of each candle flame;
The roses bloom and blossom in your name.
Be parted from you? Never! I confess
My love and devotion until death;
Tormented, I remain a target for your blows:
Yours, when I die, will be the blood that flows.

Chapter 30

And Majnun's father, the old Sayyid — what had become of him during this time?

Age and sorrow had bent his back and turned his hair white. He was like Jacob robbed of his beloved Joseph, only worse: Jacob at least had other sons to console him in his grief, but Majnun's father had only Majnun and was thus destined to suffer alone. He could see his own fate only too well, and it was blacker than the blackest night, a night without end.

And his days were as dark as his nights. He would sit in a corner of his tent, waiting for the signal that would herald his departure to that last, eternal resting place. He knew that the signal would not be long in coming, for already he had passed the three signposts of Sorrow, Weakness and Old Age.

There was only one tie that still bound him to the

world, and that tie was Majnun. The old Sayyid was not afraid of death. But he was afraid that he might die without seeing his son, the light of his eyes, just one more time before he departed. He had little to leave him — worldly possessions counted for nothing in his eyes — but it grieved him to think that the little he did have might go to a stranger rather than to his own flesh and blood.

And so he resolved to find Majnun and talk to him one last time. Perhaps he would be able to make the boy see sense; perhaps he would be able to persuade him to detach his soul from the desert, to rescue his heart from his obsession.

The hope of seeing Majnun once more was the rock upon which his fragile existence now depended; it was the rope that bound him tenuously to the life of this world. And so, staff in hand, he set out in the company of two young men from his tribe, confident that his Lord would lead him to his goal.

The journey was a tortuous one, even for the youths. They crossed vast plains that baked in the sun's fierce heat. They encountered desolate mountain passes beneath towering volcanic peaks. They were bitten by mosquitoes and desert midges, and their feet were blistered from the scorching sand. From oasis to oasis they moved, resting overnight and asking every passing stranger for news of Majnun.

After several weeks, it seemed that they would never reach their goal. But finally, just as the old Sayyid feared that he would expire from the heat and the dust and the hopelessness of it all, they met an old

Bedouin who had news of Majnun.

'You are looking for Majnun?' he said, his eyes widening. 'Then I can help you, for I know where he is! It is a God-forsaken place, a desert cave that resembles a pit in the flames of hellfire itself. I would not advise you to go there — unless, that is, you are unafraid of death!'

The old Sayyid's young companions begged him to turn back, but he would have none of it. And so they set off once more, this time in the direction given to them by the old Bedouin, and after a full day's journey they arrived at their destination.

The place was so desolate, so bleak, that it made the travellers weep. And when they found Majnun — or, at least, the creature they assumed was Majnun — they had cause to weep some more. The old Sayyid hardly recognised him as human, let alone as his own flesh and blood. Majnun was no more than a few thin bones, held together by filthy rags. He moved on all fours like a beast of the field, like some grotesque spirit from the underworld that rises from time to time in order to haunt the world of men. His hair matted, his skin caked with grime, he writhed in the dust like a serpent on the edge of death. It was a sight to move the hardest of hearts.

Overwhelmed by love and pity, by compassion and sorrow, the old Sayyid fell to his knees and clasped his son to his breast. Tenderly, he ran his fingers over his face, wiping away the dust and the dirt with his own tears. Majnun looked up at his father, yet he did not see him. Who was this old man and for whom was he

weeping? He stared into his father's face but did not recognise him. How was he to recognise his father when he could not even recognise himself? He looked the old man in the eye and said, 'Who are you? Where are you from? What do you want from me?'

'I have been searching for you all the time, my son', replied the old Sayyid.

When Majnun heard his father's voice, he recognised at last who the stranger was. He fell forward into the old man's arms and began to weep uncontrollably. The old Sayyid kissed his son's cheeks and pressed him so hard to his breast that his heart was fit to burst. For several tearful minutes, they remained in each other's arms.

When they had both regained their composure, the old Sayyid took from his bag a cloak of the softest silk, a fine pair of leather shoes and a turban of white damask. It was not fitting that his son should walk around like one of the living dead, like a corpse resurrected in nakedness from the grave on the Day of Judgement; something clearly had to be done. Majnun, for his part, cared nothing for clothes, but in obedience to his father he put them on.

Then the old Sayyid sat his son down and began to speak with him kindly, but firmly.

'Dearest heart!' he said, 'What kind of place is this in which to rest your head? Have you really chosen this hell as your hiding place? Is this your way of asking Fate to finish you off, to give your body up to wild beasts once you have died so that they may pick at your bones and devour your flesh?

'I beg you, escape while there is still time. Even the town dogs have a better life than you have here.

'Have you really come so far for so little? Believe me, nothing will come of running away; run until the day you die and still you will get nowhere. What use is all this suffering? What good does it do? Who does it help? Do you want to undo yourself completely?

'You must try to overcome your grief; if not, it will overcome you. It will consume you completely, for you are not invincible.

'For too long you have rebelled. Enough is enough! You have to learn to accept things as they are: the world will not change on your account, especially if you turn your back on it. Why do you live among beasts in this wilderness? Why do you hide away in this foul cave, a demon poet feasting on his own sorrow?

'Try to tear your mind away from all this; try to think of something else, something trivial and of no consequence. Laugh and joke and be happy; yes, it will be false at first but soon the laughter will become real! Indulge yourself, lose yourself a little in the pleasures of the world.

'And why not? That is life. Life blows hot and cold and you must learn to accommodate it. And whether its promises are true or false, you must learn to enjoy each moment as it comes. You must seize the day, for tomorrow is not to be trusted. Enjoy what you have now! Reap what you have sown now! For today is your day: tomorrow belongs to death, and to death alone.

'Nothing counts but what you have achieved so far: a woman can wear only the clothes she possesses; a

man can reap only what he has sown. If you hope to achieve greatness in life, you must begin today.

'You must treat life as though this were your first day and also your last. Behave as though death were at your door this very moment; then, when death does arrive, you will have no fear. For only those who "die" before they die may hope to escape death's jaws.'

The old man brushed a tear from his son's cheek and continued: 'All sorrows must cease eventually; bring your sorrows to an end now. Come home with me. Are you a ghoul, a demon? Or are you a man? If you are a man, then you must live like one.

'O, my son! Come, be my companion once more for the short time that is left of my life. My day is over; for me, night is approaching. If you do not come with me today, tomorrow you will not find me. I have to depart, and you have to don my mantle and carry on in my place. Soon my sufferings will be over and I will be at peace, God willing.

'My sun is sinking fast, clouded by the dust of a long, long day. The darkness beckons, the night breeze is waiting to carry my soul away. Come, my son, while we still have a little time to share. Come and take my place, for it belongs to no one but you.'

Chapter 31

At first, Majnun complied with his father's wishes: for several days he rested, he ate and drank, he dressed in proper clothes like ordinary people, he abandoned his odes and his sonnets, and he listened attentively whenever his father spoke of their imminent return to civilization.

Yet it was a deceit from start to finish. Majnun wanted so badly to please his father that he would have agreed to anything. But in the end, the shame of lying overwhelmed him. He turned to his father and said, 'You are the breath that gave life to my soul, and that gives life to me still. I am your servant, ready to obey your every command. But there is one thing, dear Father, that I cannot do. I cannot change what Fate has decreed.

'Dear Father! Yours is a currency minted in

wisdom; mine is a currency minted in love! Yours is the sober language of reason; mine is the wild gibberish of a man made mad by desire! This is how it is; it cannot be changed.

'Can you not see that I have forgotten my past? The pages of my memory are all blank, the words have been washed away. I am not the man I used to be. If you ask me to tell you what has happened, I cannot say because I do not remember. I know that you are my father and I am your son, but that is all. I do not even remember your name ...'

His words trailed away and for a moment he was lost in thought. Now, for the first time, he understood perfectly what Fate had decreed for him. He continued, 'True, dear Father, you are a stranger to me, but do not be grieved or surprised by this fact. For I too am a stranger: I am a stranger to myself: I no longer know who I am. I keep asking myself, "Who are you? What is your name? Are you in love, and if so, with whom? Are you loved, and if so, by whom?" A fire burns in my soul, a fire so fierce that it has consumed my very being and reduced it to ashes. And now I am lost in a wilderness of my own making.

'Do you not see that I have become as wild as my surroundings, as savage as the beasts that you see here? How, then, can I return to the world of men? I am alien to them, and their world is alien to me. Do not try to make me go back, Father, because it will not work. It would never work. I would be a burden to you and a danger to others. My place is here, where I can do least harm.

'If only you could forget that I ever existed! If only you could erase me from memory and forget that you ever had a son! If only you could bury me here and think to yourself: "There lies some poor fool, some drunkard possessed, who reaped what he had sown and got what he deserved."

'Dear Father! You say that your sun is setting and you must depart, and that this is why you came to bring me back. But my sun is setting too, for I am drawn inexorably towards death; you could even say that death is within me, consuming me from the inside. If it is too late, it is too late for both of us. Who knows, maybe my departure will precede yours. I have died inside already, and I have all but killed you with grief. So let the dead not mourn the dead.'

Chapter 32

From these words the old Sayyid understood clearly that Majnun was his no longer. The poor demented fool was a prisoner in love's dark citadel, a stronghold from which no-one could free him.

The old man took Majnun in his arms and said, 'My dear son! You consume yourself in your sorrow, feasting on your own blood. What shall I do with you? You are my pain — but you are also my pride. It is clear that there is nothing more that I can do to persuade you to come with me. And so I shall leave; I shall leave you for my home town, and then I shall leave my home town and depart this world for ever.

'Hold me tight, dear son! See how our tears flow and become one river? These tears will cleanse me so that I may start out on the road refreshed. Hold me

tight, dearest heart! These last few minutes with you must, I fear, suffice as sustenance for my journey. I have packed my things and am ready to move on. Moving, moving — man is forever moving! And so it must be.

'Goodbye, my son! Never again in this world will I set eyes on you. Goodbye! The boat that awaits me is ready to sail, never to return. It is strange: already I feel that my soul is breaking free! Goodbye, my darling boy! Never again shall we meet in this world.'

Majnun watched as the old Sayyid and his two travelling companions moved off across the sands. He knew that his father had spoken the truth, and that they would never meet again — at least not in this world. Indeed, just two days after the old man arrived back at his home, he passed away, his soul and spirit free at last.

Each soul is but a flash of light, born to shine for a brief moment before fading for ever. In this realm, everything is destined to perish; nothing is made to last. But if you 'die' before you die, turning away from the world and its Janus face, you will achieve the supreme salvation of life eternal. It is up to you: you are your own fate, and whatever is, or will be, lies within you. And in the end, good will be united with good, and evil with evil. Your secret is shouted from the mountain-tops: when the echo returns, you recognise the voice as your own ...

Chapter 33

It so happened at this time that a hunter from the tribe of Amir was out stalking desert deer in the wastes of Najd when he came across Majnun. Now Majnun was not his prey, but the hunter's tongue was sharper than any knife. He shouted, 'So this is where you hide yourself. Is Layla the only person in your life who means anything to you? Have you no thoughts for the mother who gave birth to you, who raised you, nurtured you and watched over you with the tender solicitude that exists only in a mother's heart? Is this how you repay her kindess, by forsaking her?

'And what about your father? True, he was alive when you saw him last, but now the burden of grief has taken him to the grave. Tell me this: do you enjoy your life, knowing that his is finished? Do you think of him at all? In your selfishness you bury yourself alive in this

wilderness when you should be kneeling at his grave, asking his forgiveness. But it is clear that you are too wrapped up in your own emotions even to think of paying your last respects to him. What a pathetic creature you are! A son like you would be better dead than alive; then at least the mourning of those who love you would have meaning.'

The hunter's impassioned diatribe cut into Majnun's heart like a red-hot blade. The sinews in his body were suddenly like harp strings in the hands of some crazed musician: his head lolled to one side, his arms thrashed the air and his legs buckled beneath him. With a terrible moan of grief he fell on to his face, banging his head repeatedly on the stony earth until the blood ran into his eyes and mingled with his tears.

The journey to his father's tomb was a difficult one, lasting several days and nights and entailing much hardship, but Majnun did not care. At the sight of his father's headstone he was overcome once more by grief and fell into a sobbing heap at the foot of the grave. The old man had been unable to rescue him, but at least he had shared his son's suffering. Majnun's pain had been his pain and their tears had become a single river. But now Majnun's tears must fall alone.

Wracked by grief, Majnun clawed at the earth and begged his father for some response, some sign. He cried out in a sorrowful voice, 'O Father! Where are you now? For so many years you cared for me, nurtured and sustained me, and now it has all come to this! You were my rock, and now you are dust; you were my staff, and now you are ashes. To whom can I turn, now that you

have turned from life and entered the realm of death? You were always there for me, even though all I gave you was pain and heartache. How I wish that I had made you happy by being the kind of son you always dreamed of having; instead I tortured you and sent you to an early grave. And now I am tortured by this separation, by the indescribable loneliness I feel now that you are gone. Without you I am nothing: why did I let you go alone? Do not chastise me, Father, because I know better than anyone how much I have let you down. And if I blacken my face with the earth from your grave, it is not only because I wish to be near you: it is also because I wish to hide my shame.

'I know that you wanted what was best for me, but I rejected you and pushed away your helping hand. When you were gentle and solicitous, I was hard and callous; when you offered me warmth, I responded with nothing but coldness. A thousand times you suffered, but not once did I come to you. You made up a room for me, prepared a bed where I could rest, but I refused. You offered me a table filled with food, but all I did was turn my back on it and close my eyes to your kindness. You placed the world at my feet, but all I could do was kick it. All of this I know, dear Father, and I cannot begin to tell you how much it pains me. That is all I have left: pain without relief, regret without end, sorrow without consolation. You created a niche for me in a corner of your heart: now that Fate has sealed up that niche, here I am trying to reach it! How could this have happened? One day we were together and now you are gone — but I am still here! How can this be? O Lord,

how great is my sin! How deep my guilt! O Lord, the blame is all mine and the grief is all mine!'

And so he lamented, clawing wildly at his breast as though trying to break the skin and grasp his heart in his hand. Night fell and the darkness covered him in his despair, black upon black. Only with the coming of the dawn, when the new sun rose into a lavender sky and scattered gold dust on the mountain peaks, did Majnun leave his father's tomb. Humbled and forlorn, he made his way back once more to the caves and ravines of Najd.

Chapter 34

After the death of his father, Majnun felt an even greater need to cling to the wilderness and his life of isolation. Like a mountain lion, he would climb the steep rocks and explore gorges and wild ravines where no human being had ever set foot. Restlessly he moved from place to place, as though searching for some hidden treasure, his eyes darting this way and that, his heart beating like a drum.

The true object of his search, of course, was Layla. He sought her everywhere, in the hope of finding her somewhere.

Yes, Layla was the treasure that he was seeking; she was the gem of unparalleled beauty that had driven him out of his mind and forced him to take refuge in a place almost as inhospitable as Hell itself. He had been forced to leave his home by his desire to make a home with

her. Day and night, the flames of this desire burned away inside him: whenever he saw tents and camp fires he would be drawn there as though he were a moth, as though in some inexplicable way those tents and fires were manifestations of his beloved.

Now Majnun was famous among the Arabs — which man, given Majnun's verses, would not be? — and so when one day he came across a group of people who knew him, he was not in the least surprised. They stood watching him as he hugged his sides, his eyes closed as though in prayer, a verse extolling Layla's beauty on his lips. Suddenly a scrap of paper, borne by the wind, fell at Majnun's feet; on it were written the words, Layla and Majnun. Someone, somewhere, had written down the lovers' names as if to celebrate their love and their loyalty.

The crowd that now surrounded Majnun tut-tutted in awe at this wondrous sign, but soon their amazement turned to disbelief. For Majnun was tearing the paper in two! He took the half on which 'Layla' was written, screwed it up into a ball and tossed it over his shoulder; the part with his own name he kept for himself. Cries of astonishment went up. Surely this was no way for a lover to behave. A voice shouted, 'What do you mean by this action? What kind of behaviour is this? For once, on paper at least, you and your beloved were united, and now you have cut yourself off from her and discarded her. Explain yourself!'

Majnun smiled. 'Do you not realise,' he said, 'that one name is better than two? For one is enough for both. If only you knew the reality of love, you would

see that when you scratch a lover, you find his beloved. Do you understand?'

It was clear that they did not understand. 'You say that one name is enough for two', they said, 'and that indeed may be so. But if that is the case, why did you throw away Layla's name and not your own?'

'The answer is simple,' replied Majnun. 'One is able to see the shell but not the pearl inside. Do you not understand? The name is a shell and nothing more. It is what the shell hides that counts. I am the shell and she is the pearl; I am the veil and she is the face beneath it.'

Chapter 35

Still speaking on the subject of his beloved, Majnun left the people and their tents and headed back whence he came. He was on fire with love, glowing like a burning coal. Every now and again the coal would burst into flame, lashing at his tongue and unleashing torrents of words that streamed from his lips, verses that he strung together like pearls on a rosary. He would lavish them on the wind, allowing them to scatter and fall in profusion — rich pickings indeed for those lovers, and lovers of poetry, who heard them and passed them on. Majnun was wildly extravagant with his art, but what did it matter? Was he not rich? Was he not free to do as he pleased?

To other men, Majnun was now little more than a savage, a wild beast to be pitied as it choked on its own isolation and degradation. But he was not alone: even a

'madman' has friends. Majnun's friends were the animals; the beasts who roamed the desert wilderness were his companions, and he could not have wanted for better.

Majnun had entered the world of the desert animals as a stranger, yet they took to him immediately. For Majnun had come in peace. He had not come to hunt or trap them, to maim or kill them. He had crept into their caves and their dens not as a violent enemy but as a grateful guest. They had seen no evil from his hands and so they respected him.

Of course, it might have been that the animals thought that Majnun was one of their own kind, but this was only partly true. They knew instinctively that he was different from other men. He possessed a very special power, a power that had nothing to do with bodily strength or sharpness of teeth as in the case of the lion, the puma or the desert wolf. Majnun's power — the source of his hold over the animals — lay in the fact that he did not kill things smaller than himself. He was not a predator, and they felt safe with him.

Yet, at first, they did not understand him. What kind of creature was he, that could so easily have killed others for food but did not? Why was he like this? Who could understand the mind of such a being? He fed on roots and berries — and then only sparingly — and he showed no signs of fear when surrounded by beasts of prey who could so easily have ripped him to pieces and feasted on his bones. Yet he was never attacked, not once. To everyone's surprise, Majnun was never threatened or intimidated by any of the desert beasts.

The animals soon became used to this strange being from the world of men. Whenever they caught sight of him, or made out his scent on the breeze, they would all come trotting or running, crawling or flying, to gather around him. Before long, Majnun had a vast menagerie of beasts of every kind and size. In his presence the animals seemed to be under some kind of spell, for they would forget their wild natures and become tame and friendly. So attached did they become to Majnun that eventually they began to watch over him like royal guards as he slept. First a lion stood over him, like a sheepdog guarding its flock. Soon others followed — stags, wolves, lynxes, pumas, desert foxes — and before long, Majnun was not able to take five minutes' rest without the place turning into a camp for desert animals.

In this court of beasts, Majnun was King, a veritable Solomon who ruled with wisdom and compassion. He was a King of goodness and love; a King who never tyrannised his subjects, nor squeezed them for taxes, nor forced them to sacrifice their lives or spill the blood of others for the sake of some pointless war.

Guided by their master's example, the animals gradually lost their lust for blood and their urge to kill. The wolf no longer tormented the lamb, the puma befriended the gazelle, the lioness suckled the orphaned fawn, and the fox concluded a treaty of peace with the hare. The army of beasts that accompanied Majnun wherever he went was a peaceful army, an army fuelled by love, compassion and brotherhood.

The selfless love of an animal for its master often surpasses in intensity the love of one human being for another. Majnun's animal companions were shining examples of such selfless love. For example, whenever Majnun wished to sleep, the desert fox would sweep a place clean and free of thorns for him with its tail, while the wild onager would offer its neck as a pillow. Then, while Majnun lay sleeping, the lion would keep watch over him, ready to ward off any enemies, while the wolf and the puma would scout the camp for unwelcome visitors or intruders. Each beast did its duty, watching over and protecting Majnun with a sincerity of intention that touched his heart.

Yet the more he became used to his animal companions, the less he saw of other human beings. Those who had visited him in his desert hide-out were afraid of the company he kept and were loathe to visit him again. And when Majnun appeared at some camp or oasis with his animals in tow, people would run away. Whenever a stranger approached Majnun to talk with him, the animals would bare their teeth and begin to snarl and growl until their master quietened them and allayed their suspicions. Only then would the stranger remain unharmed. Those who came merely to mock Majnun, or to harm him in any way, were often forced to make a speedy getaway lest sharp teeth and claws and fangs tear them to pieces.

Has history ever known a master like Majnun? Has there ever been such a shepherd and such a flock? When the story of Majnun and his new companions reached the people, they found it difficult to believe.

Was this not merely the re-working of some old fairy story, some legend from times gone by? Many would not believe it until they saw with their own eyes, and so they traversed the desert wastes to see for themselves. When they found Majnun with his retinue of loyal desert beasts, they were more often than not lost for words, not knowing what to think or say. In many cases, their astonishment was mixed with pity; knowing that love had reduced him to such an existence, they would bring him food and drink, trying in the only way they knew to ease his distress. While Majnun accepted their gifts, he would eat nothing himself, preferring to pass it on to his animal friends. And since he was goodness itself, they, too, became good.

Chapter 36

Do animals not reflect man? Are the attributes present in the beasts of the earth not merely an echo of human nature? Ponder this point while we digress awhile ...

There was once a King, the ruler of Marv, who owned a number of guard-dogs. They were not ordinary, run-of-the-mill guard dogs, however; let us say that they were demons on leashes, veritable hounds from hell.

Each possessed the strength of a puma, while their jaws were strong enough to sever a camel's head with one bite. Why did the King keep such beasts?

The reason was simple. Whenever someone fell out of favour with the King, or incurred his wrath in some way, the King would have the offender thrown to these dogs, who would then rip the poor wretch to

pieces and devour his flesh.

Now, among the King 's courtiers there was a young man of considerable wisdom and intelligence, a master of the arts of diplomacy and courtly etiquette. He was aware, of course, of the existence of these satanic beasts and the purpose that they served.

He was also aware, as were his peers, that the King was a wildly irritable man with a mercurial temperament.

Those whom the King favoured one day would suddenly find themselves out of favour the next, usually for no apparent reason. The King's mood was as unpredictable as the spring sky; what has happened to others, the young man reasoned, may so easily happen to me, too.

And so he lay awake at night, pondering the grim fate that might be in store for him. What on earth was he to do?

Finally, the young man hit upon a plan. Whenever the opportunity arose, he would pass by the kennels where these canine demons were chained up. There he would converse awhile with their keepers, bringing them small gifts in order to win their confidence and gain their trust.

Thus began the second part of his plan. His growing friendship with the keepers of the dogs opened up a path to friendship with the dogs themselves.

Every few days he would bring pieces of meat for them; sometimes, when he had had more access than usual to the royal kitchens, he would bring a whole

sheep or goat.

Gradually, he won the trust and confidence of the dogs; before long, they had become so used to his visits that they would leap up and howl with pleasure whenever they saw him approaching.

He, for his part, had overcome his fear. He would stroke them and play with them as though they were kittens. This, of course, had been his aim from the outset.

One day, for no apparent reason, the King became angry with the young man, just as the young man had feared he might.

Summoning his guards, the King ordered the young man to be thrown to the dogs. Binding the hapless youth's hands and feet, the guards dragged him to the kennels and pushed him through the gate, locking it behind him.

Then they stood and waited for the vicious beasts to attack.

But of course, nothing happened. Human beings may not always repay kindness with kindness, but dogs — however vicious — most certainly do. As soon as they recognised the young man as the one who had brought them gifts and lavished attention on them, they ran to him and began to lick his hands and face in a tender show of affection.

Then they sat bolt upright at his side, ready to protect him from danger. Not even the juiciest bones and chunks of meat thrown by their keepers could tempt them away from their friend.

The King's guards looked on in astonishment.

They had come to feast their eyes on a bloodbath; instead they were witness to a touching display of affection between man and beast.

Unable to believe what they were seeing, the guards shouted at the dogs, urging them to attack, but their cries went unheeded.

As the sun set behind the mountains, covering the snow-tipped peaks with a mantle of red and gold, the King sat in his chamber, his anger now diminished considerably.

In fact, he was beginning to feel pangs of remorse for having acted so recklessly, for destroying the life of a young man for almost no reason.

Of course, he was unaware of what had happened earlier that day in the kennels, and none of his courtiers had dared to tell him.

As the evening wore on, he became more and more distraught. 'Why?' he cried, his voice aflame; 'Why did I order that innocent young man to be thrown to the dogs? Why did I act so hastily? Go now, go and bring me news. Go and see what has happened to the poor wretch.'

The courtiers hastened to the kennels and returned with one of the guards, ordering him to report everything to the King.

Naturally, the guard was afraid to tell exactly what he had seen that day; how could he confess that the condemned youth had escaped almost certain death by showing affection to the hounds from hell and winning them over with gifts?

And so he approached the King, bowed, and with a

trembling voice said, 'Your Majesty! This young man cannot be human; indeed, I declare that he must be some kind of jinn or angel for whom God in His compassion has worked a miracle.

'Come, your Majesty, and see for yourself! He is sitting in the middle of the cage, surrounded by your dogs. And what do they do? Instead of tearing him limb from limb they rub against him affectionately and lick his face!

'Is that not a miracle? Is that not a sign from God? These are no ordinary beasts — they are more like demons than dogs — yet in that young man's presence they are like playful kittens.'

The King jumped up from his throne and rushed out of the chamber and through the palace grounds to the kennels.

Seeing the miracle with his own eyes, he began to weep. And when the guards had brought the young man out of the cage, the King, still sobbing violently, embraced him and begged his forgiveness.

Several days later, the King asked for the young man to be brought to his chamber, so that they might speak awhile in private.

Not believing in miracles as such, the King was anxious to know what had really happened in the cage, and why the young man had not been ripped to pieces like so many others before him. 'Tell me, young man,' he said, 'why did my dogs not kill you? What is your secret?'

As the young man told his story, the King's eyes widened and he shook his head with disbelief. The

young man answered him:

'It is true that your dogs became my friends and spared me my life on account of a few bones and some scraps of meat. I showed them a little kindness and they repaid me by saving my life.

'But what about you, your Majesty? I have served you loyally for ten years — for most of my life, and you know this quite well. Yet, you were ready to have me torn apart by your dogs on account of some trivial misdemeanour on my part that happened to displease you.

'Because I annoyed you for a few moments, you gave orders to have me killed! Tell me who, then, is a better friend: you or your hounds from hell? Who deserves my respect: your Majesty or your Majesty's canine demons?'

The young man spoke with considerable daring and courage, but the King was not angered. On the contrary, the King was humbled.

It was clear that the whole experience was a test from God for all concerned, and that from it there was a lesson that had to be learned. The King decided never again to act on a whim and throw innocent people to his hounds; instead, he would try to tame the beast in his own soul.

But we have digressed too far. What of Majnun? Well, he was kind to the animals not because he was afraid of them, but because kindness was part of his being; he could not help but treat them with respect and compassion.

Consequently, the beasts who gathered around

him came to love him as much as he loved them. Their loyalty to him was unswerving and, as we have yet to see, they stayed with him right to the very end.

Is the significance of this anecdote easy to grasp? Do you understand what it means, dear reader? It means that if you, too, follow the example of Majnun, you will not have to suffer the torments and miseries of this transient world.

Chapter 37

The moon was a shining silver orb, while on the horizon Venus burned like sulphur. Meteors fell to the earth like blazing spears tossed by some heavenly hand, while the stars sparkled like a myriad of sequins sewn on to the indigo cloak of the sky.

Majnun stood looking up at the heavens, his eyes wandering from planet to planet, from star to star. Which one of them should he invoke? Which one of them would come to his aid?

As his eyes scanned the horizon, he first noticed Venus, and cried, 'O Venus! You are the guiding light for all those who seek happiness in this world. Mistress of poets and singers, in your hands lies the key to success. You are the seal in the signet ring of the King, you are the queen in the palace of worldly prosperity, you are the ruling star of lovers. Yours is the gift of

pleasant words on ruby lips; those who belong to your circle, and drink your wine, are scented with ambergris. Admit me to your circle also, and bestow your favours upon me! Open the gate of hope: do not let me die waiting! My soul is sick and only you know the cure. Let the night breeze bring the scent of my beloved to me while there is still time!'

After he had petitioned Venus, Majnun turned to Jupiter. Could he not help him too? Majnun said, 'O Jupiter, star of delight! You are a loyal soul, for you always keep your promise. You stand for fairness and equity; on each realm you leave your seal, for you are the star of just rulers and jurists. You determine who is to be victorious; the Pen of Fate is in your hands! The future of the whole cosmos depends on you! Keep faith with me, for my heart draws all its strength from you. Do not close your eyes in my hour of need!'

Chapter 38

Majnun invoked planet after planet, star after star, yet not once did he receive an answer. The heavens remained silent and Majnun's soul froze in the chill of their icy, heartless beauty. The heavenly bodies went on their way, unconcerned with his plight, oblivious to his heartache. What did they care? Why should they trouble themselves to help him?

And then Majnun realised; for the first time it all became clear. The stars did not care for him because they could not care. The stars, like the grains of sand beneath his feet, were blind, deaf and dumb! Their glittering show was just that — a show. Beneath the splendid façade, they were but inanimate creatures with neither voice nor vision. What could the suffering of a human soul possibly mean to them?

And so Majnun raised his face to the heavens once

more, but this time not to invoke the stars. They are mere subjects like me, he thought. And where there are subjects, there must be a ruler. If the creation will not answer me, he thought, maybe the Creator will.

And so Majnun prayed to Him Who has created all beings on earth, and Who is without need. He said, 'O Lord! To whom can I turn, if not to You? Venus and Jupiter are but Your bondsmen, doing Your bidding, while Yours is the well-spring of all creation. Your knowledge encompasses all things, while the extent of Your bounty cannot be fathomed. All power belongs to You, and there is no chain so strong that You could not break it. You are the Supreme Judge, the Lord Nurturer and Sustainer of all beings. Whatever the great ones in this world have, they have because of You. You are the One Who comes to the aid of those in need. We are all prisoners in chains — each and every one of us — and no one else can help us if You do not.

'The seven heavens and all that exists therein belong to You. All beings — however great or insignificant — bow to Your command.

'O Lord! You fashioned me from clay, resonant, dark and heavy, and breathed life into me from Your own spirit. Life is from You, for Yours alone is the power to quicken the dead. Tonight I stand before you as one who lives and breathes, it is true, but also as one whose very soul has died. Only Your mercy can save me now; only Your grace can rescue me from eternal perdition. Only Your compassion can turn my darkness into light, my night into day.'

When Majnun had finished his prayer, he was

overwhelmed by a deep sense of serenity. No longer did he feel the need to scan the horizons or scout the night sky. His heart had found a resting-place and when sleep stole into his eyes, he did not notice it. Soon he was dreaming, and in his dreams he saw strange things:

Out of the ground in front of him a tree appeared suddenly and started to grow. Rapidly it shot up before his eyes until it was towering above him. Following it as it continued to shoot up to the heavens, Majnun noticed a bird perched on one of the topmost branches. Something in the bird's beak was glittering. The bird left the tree and hovered above Majnun awhile. Then it opened its beak and let the glittering object fall. The glittering object was a jewel, and it fell directly on to Majnun's head. And there it remained, like the shining centrepiece of a royal diadem.

Majnun awoke just as the sun was rising. His precious dream had vanished, but his whole being was filled by a feeling of happiness and inner joy. He had not felt so untroubled and peaceful for a long time. His body felt light, as though it had the power of flight. Was his soul about to take wing? Was this sudden burst of happiness all because of a simple dream?

Chapter 39

Often a dream is so real, so full of the light of truth, that its effulgence permeates our whole being and brightens our waking hours. Such was Majnun's dream. When he woke, he woke to a morning whose possibilities seemed endless. The air was crystal-clear and filled with a scent that could only have wafted down from Paradise itself; each breeze was like the breath of Christ, sent to awaken the dead and alert them to the beauty of living.

The day, the whole life that stretched ahead, seemed to Majnun to be a wondrous rose-garden, filled with magic. How could the seeds of misfortune take root in such heavenly soil?

Fate, too, had grown tired of Majnun's suffering and so She had dealt him hand after hand of happiness. But was it too late?

Majnun was sitting on the mountainside, in one of his tiny retreats that were surrounded by rocks for protection. His animals were nearby, as usual, some sleeping, some keeping guard.

Suddenly, he caught sight of a small dustcloud at the very bottom of the valley. Violet-coloured in the pale ochre light of morning, it whirled like a dervish as it moved upwards. Slowly, it came nearer until it looked like a veil covering a woman's face. And just as it is sometimes possible to perceive the face behind the veil, Majnun could see that the swirling dust hid a rider, a rider clad in deep violet whose steed was moving like the wind.

'Who is he and what does he want?' thought Majnun. 'There is neither tent nor caravanserai for miles around; what is he doing here?' Clearly, the rider was looking for him, for Majnun. Majnun rose to his feet, his heart beating wildly. Could it be the same black camel-rider who once brought him the news of Layla's marriage to Ibn Salam?

The rider reined in his horse and dismounted, covering the last twenty paces over the rocks on foot and with considerable difficulty, for as Majnun could now see, his visitor was an old man and his face was quite unfamiliar.

Majnun lifted his hand to quieten his animals, who had begun to stir and growl. Then he went forward to greet the rider.

Majnun said kindly, 'Noble sir, it seems that you have lost your way. Tell me, where are you bound? Or could it be that you are here to see me? No, that could

not be, for we are strangers to each other. I like your face, but my animals do not trust you: see how they growl and snarl. And I feel that I should not trust you either. As they say, those who have been bitten by a snake will recoil at the mere sight of a rope! I have been bitten by such a snake — no, it was not a snake, it was a dragon!

'Some time ago, another rider came to me and drove a stake through my heart: the splinters are there still and cause me great pain. So you see, I have a right to mistrust you. And if you have come to finish what he started, you had better keep silent and retrace your steps immediately.'

Hearing these words, the stranger threw himself at Majnun's feet and cried, 'Among all creatures you are the noblest, for you have tamed the wildest of beasts and made them your boon companions! Gazelles nuzzle against you and give you their love; tigers brush against you with tenderness and affection; lions gambol with you as though they were tabby cats bought from a market stall.

'Why should you and your animals be afraid of a frail old man like me? I wish you no harm; I am here with a message from your beloved. It is a secret message, a missive such as no one has ever brought before. It is from her to you, and to you alone. If you still want me to remain silent and retrace my steps, so be it, but I think you had better let me speak.'

Such words Majnun had not expected, and his heart was suddenly filled with hope. Grasping the old man by the shoulders he said, 'For the love of God, speak,

man! Speak quickly and put me out of my misery!'

The old man continued, 'I know that Fate has been unkind to you: your stars have behaved like a pack of obstinate mules, but there is no reason why you should not tame them! But first let me tell you what happened to me.

'A few days ago, I happened to pass by a camp of tents close to a garden — a shady grove with streams, flowers and tall palms. I walked around for a while until I saw someone sitting alone, all but hidden by leaves. I say "someone", but in reality I thought I had chanced upon a star that had fallen down from heaven! It seemed as though the garden was the Garden of Paradise itself, and she one of the *houris* promised to the faithful.

'Now a bubbling brook ran through the oasis, like the streams of milk and honey that run through heaven, but when this young picture of beauty began to speak, the words poured from her lips so sweetly and with such eloquence that the stream ceased to ripple and splash, as though it, too, was hanging on her every word. As for her eyes — well, what can I say?! Even a lion would fall into a trance were the eyes of such a gazelle to fall on him!

'Her appearance was that of a most beauteous book in which all of the subtlest, most beautiful characters of our alphabet had been written. Her hair was curled like the hook of the letter "Jim"; her figure was as lithe and slender as an "Alif"; her mouth was curved like a "Mim". Yes, when you add these three letters together, they spell "*Jam*" [goblet], and that is what she was: a

precious goblet of crystal reflecting the secrets of the universe!

'Her eyes are narcissi that flower at the mouth of a stream: look deep into them and you can see her dreams! But with these few words I cannot do justice to her beauty, for it is like the light of life itself. Yet her beauty is scarred by the weakness that comes with a broken heart. Grief has brought her to her knees; for so long have the tears filled her eyes that she can hardly see.'

The old man sighed deeply, wiped a tear from his eye and continued, 'Believe me, she married out of fear: in reality, you are her only hope. As she spoke, tears misted her eyes; they were like a veil blocking the sun's light. Indeed, it was a sight to move the stoniest of hearts!

'I approached her and asked her who she was and why she was so sad. She lifted her face, a weak smile on her ruby lips, and said, "Why do you rub salt into my wounds? Let me tell you that I was once Layla, but I am Layla no longer. I am now mad, more 'majnun' than a thousand Majnuns. He may be a crazed dervish, a wild wanderer tormented by love, but believe me my suffering is a thousand times worse!

'"True, he is a target for the arrows of grief, but so am I — and he is a man, while I am a woman! He is free and can tell his sorrows to the mountains; he can go where he pleases, he can cry and shout and express his innermost feelings in his verses. What can I do? I am a prisoner and I can do nothing. I have no one to talk to, no one in whom I can confide; were I to open

my heart to those around me, ignominy would be my only reward. Honey turns to poison in my mouth and everything I touch turns to dust. Who knows how I feel? Who knows how I suffer? I put a brave face on it all, covering my suffering with a thin veil of smiles and laughter, but all the time I am burning, burning, burning!

'"Love cries out to me in my heart: 'Run while you can, fly away from this raven of a father, this vulture of a husband!' But then reason admonishes me, saying, 'No, to fly away would be to invite disgrace. You must stay and submit to your fate!'

'"Oh, a woman may conquer a hero and wield the sword of death above his head, yet when all is said and done she is still a woman, oppressed and unable to act of her own accord. A woman may thirst for blood and show the courage of a lion, yet for the sake of honour and dignity she must act according to her nature, as others perceive her. And so, since it is not in my power to end my suffering, I have no choice but to submit. I am not allowed to be with Majnun, but I need to know what he is doing, I hunger for news of him.

'"How does he spend his days and where does he lay his head at night? What does he do as he roams the desert wastes and who are his companions, if any? What does he say and what does he think? If you know anything at all about him, dear stranger, tell me now!"

'Such were Layla's words. As for me, well although I have met you for the first time today, I feel that I know much about you already. I have not grown old and seen the world and all it has to offer for

nothing. The story of you and your love is on everyone's lips; is anyone better known than you among the Arabs? How strange that is, and how cruel: the whole world knows about you, yet Layla alone is not allowed to hear! That is why I stayed with her a while, to talk about you. And believe me, my words made an impression on her.

'I told her: "Majnun lives alone, like a recluse, with neither friends nor family; he is alone with the memories of his love. His only companions — or so people say — are wild beasts, animals such as wild asses and mountain lions that shun the world of men. But suffering has broken him, too: love is too strong a force for a weak creature like man to repel, and so Majnun is crushed, his mind weakened and sick. His father's death took him even lower.

'"Day after day, Fate scatters thorns in his path and now he has become a poet who chronicles his own misfortunes. His verses tell the story of his life, and the story of his life is the story of love and pain. Tears fall from his eyes like rain from a spring cloud, and when he speaks of his dead father his words would melt the iciest of hearts."

'Then I recited some of your verses, the ones I had heard in the market and committed to memory. A deep sigh escaped her lips and her head drooped as though she was about to faint or die. She wept — oh, how she wept — until there were no more tears left to fall. And as she wept she prayed for your father's soul.

'She wanted to be with you now that you were doubly alone, separated from both her and your dear

father, but what could she do?

'Suddenly, a decision came to her. She gestured towards her tent in the distance and said, "You are a man of integrity with a heart that is pure. I trust you. I am going now to my tent, where I shall write a letter to Majnun. Promise to return tomorrow so that I may give you the letter to take to him. Will you promise?"

'I promised, and the next day I went to her tent. In mourning for your father she had put on a dark-blue dress: she looked like the most beautiful desert violet I had ever seen. In the folds of her dress she had hidden a sealed letter. This is that letter!'

The old messenger took the letter from his bag and handed it to Majnun. At first, Majnun showed no reaction. He stared at the parchment in his hands as though he were dreaming.

Was it too much for him to take in? Had word from his beloved come too soon? Was it too much for him to bear?

Suddenly, he came to life. It was as though he had been seized by several crazed demons whose intention it was to pull him to pieces. His body jerked this way, then that, until finally he started to whirl around like a demented dervish. He whirled around so fast that he became a blur; finally, the sweat pouring from his skin, he sank into a heap at the old man's feet.

There he lay, like a man knocked into a stupor by too much wine, completely robbed of his senses. Yet throughout his fit of madness the letter was held tightly in his fingers; it was still in his grasp as he lay there unconscious.

And when he came to, the letter was the first thing he saw. His heart was beating more calmly now and so he slowly broke the seal.

Chapter 40

Layla's letter began with an invocation:

'I begin this letter in the name of a King who gives life to the soul and succour to the heart. His knowledge encompasses all things and His wisdom is absolute: He sees and hears all things — even the prayers of those creatures that cannot speak. It is He who divides the world into light and darkness; it is He who gives every creature an allotted time on earth, from the birds in the air to the fish in the depths of the ocean. He has spangled the heavens with stars and filled the earth with people of different races and colours. He has given each man and woman a soul, and He has lit each soul with the torch of reason, so that all of His bondsmen may attain salvation.'

Then, she addressed Majnun:

'This is a parchment of sorrow, sent by one grief-stricken soul to another. It comes from me, a prisoner, and is meant for you, you who have broken through your chains and attained freedom. How long ago was it, my love, that I sealed my bond with you? How many soulless days, how many tear-filled nights have passed since then?

'How are you, dear heart, and how do you pass your days? Where have the seven planets, the heavenly guides, taken you? I know that you still stand guard over the treasure of our friendship, and I feel in my heart that love derives its majesty only from you. I know that your blood reddens the earth at sunrise and at sunset, yet you live deep in the heart of the mountains like a gem trapped in stone. In the murky darkness you are the very well-spring of Khizr, the source of the water of life itself. You are the moth who encircles the flame of eternity; you have stirred up the oceans of worldly existence, yet you turn your back on its storms and hide in the tomb of your own loneliness, with only a few wild beasts for company. All tongues wag against you, sending arrows of reproach towards your heart, but what does that matter to you? You have set your sights on eternity; even now, your caravan is on the road to the Hereafter.

'I know how much you have sacrificed; I know that it was you who burned down your own cornfield, set fire to your own harvest. You dedicated your heart to me and put your soul at my disposal, and thus became the target for gossip and slander. But that is of little consequence; neither of us cares what others think or say. Whatever they throw at us, we will face together: at least I can depend on your loyalty, and you on mine. But if only I knew what you are thinking, what you are feeling! If only I could see how you look and what you are doing! With all my love and all my heart I am with you, but what about you? With whom do you spend your time? True, I am separated from you in body, but in spirit we are as one.

'Yes, it is true: I have a husband. I have a husband, but not a lover; he has never shared my bed. Believe me, the situation has worn me down until I no longer have strength enough to fuel my thoughts, but I promise you that no one has touched my treasure: that has remained sealed like the bud of an enchanted flower that will never be opened. And so he waits, this husband of mine, behind a door whose key is hidden from view and forbidden to him.

'And yes, he is a man of great fame and nobility, but what do these things mean to me? Compared with you, dear heart, he is nothing. When seen from afar even wild garlic looks like a lily; if you smell it, however, the truth soon

becomes clear. Wild garlic is not even worth gathering!

'O my love! How I wish we could be together, but we cannot. Fate has decreed that we remain apart, and so remain apart we must. Am I to blame for the workings of Fate? My heart weeps at the very thought of it.

'My darling! Send me a lock of your hair — it would mean the world to me. Send me one of the thorns that lie in your path, and I will nurture it until it blossoms into a rose-garden before my eyes! For wherever you tread, the desert breaks into bloom: you are my Khizr, my messenger from God, my water of eternal life! I am the moon and you are my sun, giving me light from afar; forgive me that my orbit, being different to yours, keeps me away from you always.

'I heard of your father's death and it grieved me beyond belief; it was as though my own dear father had died. In deference to his memory I dressed in a mourning robe of dark blue, like a desert violet, and for many days the tears did not leave my eyes. Do you understand me, dear heart?

'I have done everything to share your grief, everything but this: I did not come to you myself, for that was impossible. But what does it matter? As I said, we are apart in body but in spirit we are one: my soul is with yours at all times. I know how much you suffer and how

your tender heart consumes itself with grief, yet there is only one way out of this misery for both of us: patience and forbearance.

'Yes, my love: patience, forbearance and hope. What is life? It is but a tale and a cry, a swift sojourn in life's caravanserai that is over almost as soon as it has begun: those who arrive barely have time to unpack their bags before they must depart! They say that the eyes are the window to the soul, and that is true. But a wise man does not let others look through that window, my love! Do you want the enemy to laugh at our tears, to mock us in our misery? Never! A wise man must hide his grief lest others feast on it, like grubs on a leaf.

'Do not consider the seeds that are scattered: think only of what will grow from them. Today your way may be blocked by thorns and stones, but tomorrow you will harvest figs and dates in abundance! Where there is a closed bud today, tomorrow there will be a rose. Do not forget this!

'And do not be sad! Do not let your heart weep such copious tears of blood, and do not think that you are alone and friendless in this world. Am I not your friend? Does the fact that I am here for you not help you? It is wrong, dear heart, to complain that you are alone. Remember the One who created you; remember that God is the Friend of all those without friends.

'You grieve for your father and your tears fall like spring rain, but remember this: the father may have gone, but the son remains! The rock may have split and crumbled, but the precious gem that it once enclosed has rolled free!'

Majnun read the letter over and over again, his eyes widening with each reading. For a long time he was beside himself, trembling like a bud ready to burst into blossom. All he could say was: 'O God, dear God!'

He folded the letter and sat down. Only then did the tears begin to fall in hot streams down his cheeks. He wept uncontrollably while the messenger looked on. Then, Majnun seized the messenger's hand and began to cover it with kisses of gratitude. Finally, he prostrated himself in front of the old man and kissed his feet. When he had regained his composure he decided that he must answer Layla's letter immediately. But how? The poet whose pearls of wisdom were common currency throughout the land had never before committed his verses to paper. 'What am I to do?' he cried, 'I have neither parchment nor pen.'

The old messenger smiled, then took out a leather case from his bag, opened it and produced everything Majnun needed to answer his beloved's missive: pen, parchment, ink and seal. 'Here,' he said with a knowing smile, 'be my guest!'

Majnun thanked the old man and sat cross-legged in the dust with the parchment on his knees. Then with tender strokes of the pen he began to write. The words

came easily and he hardly had to think what to write next. How long these words had remained hidden in his heart, nurtured by love and pain and the grief of separation! Now he fathomed the depths of his own soul like a diver, plucking out pearl after pearl that he strung together in a necklace of letters and words, of dots and curves, of flourishes and arabesques. Piece by piece, he put together a picture of his grief.

When he had finished, he handed the letter to the old man who, aware of Majnun's impatience, mounted his horse without further ado and galloped away like the wind. Presently, he arrived at Layla's tent and handed Majnun's letter to her. Her heart beating like the wings of a trapped moth, she read through a mist of tears the tender words her lover had written.

Chapter 41

Majnun's letter also began with an invocation:

'O Lord! Your knowledge encompasses all things: You know what is manifest and what is hidden, for You have created both the rock and precious gem that lies trapped within it. Yours is the dominion of the heavens with their constellations. You merge night into day, and day into night. The secrets and mysteries that lie hidden in the human heart are known to You, for nothing escapes Your vision. You cause the sap to rise in the blissful days of spring; You cause the blood to rush through our veins until the day we die. And You are the One who hears the prayer of those in need when they turn to You.'

Then he addressed Layla, saying:

'I am writing this letter as one who has renounced all ties with the world, as one whose fate now lies in your hands, as one whose blood is yours to sell as cheaply as you wish.

'You say that I am the keeper of the treasure; true, I am close to it, yet at the same time I have never been so far! The key with which I am to open that treasure has not yet been made; the iron from which it will be forged still lies sleeping in the rock.

'I am the very dust that you trample underfoot, while you are the water of life — but for whom? I lie prostrate beneath your feet while your arms embrace — who? I would even suffer harm from you, while you are caressing — who? I am your slave and your load is on my shoulders, but what about you? Whose ring hangs from your ear? You are my ka'ba, to you I turn in prayer, but what am I to you?

'You are the cure for all that is wrong with me, yet at the same time you are my sickness! You are the wine in my goblet that does not belong to me; you are the crown that was made for me, but which adorns some other brow. Yes, you are my treasure, but you are in the hands of a stranger, for him to enjoy: I am but the poor beggar who is bitten by the serpent who guards you.

'You are paradise itself, of this I am certain.

Yet nowhere do I find the key to open the gate! You are mine, yet you are not mine: you are heaven itself, but so distant that you might as well be hell with all its tortures! The tree of my being grows in the forest of your soul and belongs to you: fell that tree and a part of your own being will fall and die. I am the earth beneath your feet: if you tread lovingly, I will be the sweet spring soil that brings forth endless flowers for your enjoyment; if you stamp on me, I will be the swirling dust cloud that envelops and suffocates you.

'Did I not give myself up to you willingly? Am I not known the world over as your slave? And rightly so, for I carry a slave's burden. So act as a slave's mistress should act and do what is right! I have nothing with which to defend myself: my weapons, my shield — I have surrendered them all. I have become your prisoner without a fight, but if you refuse me I shall be put to the sword.

'Have mercy on me, and thus on yourself. Do not cut off your own nose to spite your face; do not fight your own army; do not harm your own soul! Be gentle and kind and give solace to my aching heart. Only by accepting me can you set me free.

'Does a Lord desert his servant? How can a servant obey a Lord he never sees? Let me remain in your service, as your slave; do not barter me or sell me! But it would seem that you

have done so already. Did you not carve my name on to a block of ice to melt away in the sun? Did you not lead me into the fire to be burned? Did you not do these things to me? Yes, it was you. You were the one who changed my day into night, making my life a misery while all the time lamenting over it. Is that fair? You steal my heart, you entice away my soul, and to what end? In return you give me only words that sting, while I am reduced to ashes by the fire of love.

'And what of you? What of you, dear heart, who bought me? Do I see the signs of love when I look in your face? Show me where they are! I see none. Is that why you severed all ties with me, so that you might seal your bond with another? Could it be that you seduced me with your words when all the time you were planning to give him what love desires? I hear your sighs, but are they sincere? Tell me, for if they are not sincere, your rule over me is nothing but the rule of a tyrant!

'Why are you so heartless? After all, do you not share my grief? I only have eyes for you and, as I look for the signs that will foreshadow my fate, I think only of you. My heart craves peace, but where is it to be found? Peace is his who is allowed to gaze upon you, not his whose days pass in misery like mine. He who possesses a jewel like you possesses peace and much more; he who possesses you possesses the world.

'But I do not possess you. Men dig for treasure, only to find that the earth will not surrender it: has that not been the case since time immemorial? Look at the garden! While the nightingale warbles its odes to the fig-tree, the raven makes off with its figs! The gardener nourishes the pomegranate tree with his heart's blood, only to see its fruits carried off to be given to some sick fool! Such are the ways of Fate.

'When, dear heart, will you be freed from this ogre of a husband? You are the moon in all its splendour; when, O moon, will you escape from the jaws of the dragon? When will the bee depart and leave its honey to me? When will the mirror lose its dust and shine clean again? When will the serpent die and allow me to open the casket of gems? When, when, when?

'But do not think I nurture any hatred towards your husband. Although he is the one who is near you, although he is the moth that flutters constantly around the flame of your being, I bear no grudges: may he enjoy your light, may he be happy with his flame! Yet I cannot deny that I wish ...

'O what can I say? You are my everything: my good, my bad, my sickness and my cure.

'Forgive me, my sweet! Forgive me if I have cast aspersions on your goodness, your integrity. Forgive me for suspecting you. I know that no one has yet stormed your citadel; I know

the shell that guards the pearl is still intact; I know that no one has turned the key and opened the door to your treasure. I know all this and yet ...

'For the love of God, you know what passion does to a soul like mine! Jealousy breeds evil thoughts and suspicions. You know how much I long to be near you, how I envy even the tiniest mosquito that alights on your tender skin. Yet to the mind of a lover possessed, even that mosquito is transformed into a vulture; then the fever overwhelms me and I cannot rest until the image of that vulture is banished from my mind. But how? Ibn Salam, your husband, is a noble man, of that much I am certain. But how does knowing that help me? Of what consequence is his nobility to me? To my mind, he is little better than a common thief who delights in that which he has stolen. There he is, worrying about a rose that is not his to pick, losing sleep over a pearl that is not his to treasure!

'Dearest heart, in loving you my life ebbs away, my lips wither and my eyes are blinded by tears. You cannot imagine how much of a madman, a "majnun", I have become. For you, not only have I lost the world — I have lost myself.

'But the path of true love can be taken only by those who are ready to forget themselves. For love, the faithful must pay with the blood of

their hearts, the tranquillity of their souls; otherwise their love is worth nothing. Thus you are leading me by showing the true faith of your love, even if that faith should remain concealed from me for ever.

'So let my love be the guardian of my secrets. Let the misery that love brings caress my soul! What does it matter that my sickness has no cure? As long as you are well, my suffering is immaterial.'

Chapter 42

Among Majnun's relatives there was one whose wisdom and integrity had earned him the respect and esteem of all who knew him. Salim Amiri was Majnun's maternal uncle, and he loved his sister's child as much as loved his own offspring.

Now Salim wanted more than anything to help his nephew, but even he — who knew the cure for every evil and was usually able to find a way out of any tight corner — failed in the case of Majnun.

All he could do was share his nephew's suffering from afar, lightening the poor boy's burden every now and then with presents of clean clothes and fresh food. Eventually, however, he decided that he must visit the tortured youth and reappraise the situation.

Who knows, perhaps there was something more

that could be done; perhaps there was still a way to bring the boy back home.

And so Salim mounted his strongest and swiftest camel and set off into the wilderness. The journey took many days.

Under the fierce rays of the sun, he would ride like the wind; when dusk fell, he would make his way to the nearest caravanserai to spend the night in the company of other travellers.

But as he ventured further into the heart of the desert, the caravanserai stops became less frequent, that did not deter him.

His stocks of food and water almost depleted, he rode like the wind until, at last, he discovered his estranged nephew at a place in the desert wastes where no human had ever trod before.

But Majnun was not alone. Salim found his nephew surrounded by wild beasts; it was as though he had herded together all the animals of the desert and plain into one huge army.

As Salim approached the horde, he felt fear creeping up his spine. He stopped and shouted a greeting, too afraid to dismount.

'Who are you?' came the reply. 'Who are you and what do you want here?'

'My name is Salim, from the tribe of Amir. I, too, am the plaything of Fate, if you must know.

'Do you not recognise me? I can see that the sun has blackened your face and changed you beyond recognition, but I have not changed so much! Can you not see that I am your uncle?'

Recognising his visitor, Majnun ordered his animals not to attack. Then he helped Salim dismount, greeted him in the customary manner and asked him to be seated.

With great courtesy, he enquired about his friends and relatives and his visitor's health; Salim was most surprised to find that his nephew had lost none of his politeness. Indeed, for a man living the life of a savage he seemed to Salim to be most reasonable.

Did he deserve the epithet 'Majnun', the 'madman'? Of course his outward appearance betokened savagery, it was true, but should one always judge by appearances?

As he looked his sister's child up and down, Salim felt shame and grief flood through his heart. How could such a tragedy have happened?

For a tragedy it most certainly was. Here was a young man, a scion of a noble family, the jewel in the crown of the illustrious tribe of Amir, naked as the day he was born, walking like a corpse freshly risen from the grave, surrounded by vicious, snarling beasts! No nobleman — no man — should expose himself like this, not even here in this God-forsaken place where only stars, rocks and desert beasts could see him. Such a situation was intolerable!

Salim could bear it no longer. He searched through his bag and took out a shawl.

'Forgive me, Nephew!' he said, averting his eyes, 'but I beg you to cover yourself with this shawl. It goes against decency that you should walk around naked — at least not while I am here with you.'

'What use do I have for clothes?' said Majnun, handing back the shawl. 'My body is warm enough with them.

'My heart is a furnace whose fuel is love: were I to don that shawl the heat from my heart would consume it in seconds.'

Salim insisted again and again until Majnun saw that he had no choice but to comply.

Then Salim took a cloth from his bag, spread it on the ground and covered it with the delicacies he had brought with him: cakes and pastries, sweetmeats and savouries. Who could have resisted such a delicious spread?

But the more Salim insisted, the more stubborn Majnun became, refusing even the smallest mouthful. Instead, Majnun took the food and threw it to the animals, laughing wildly as they lapped up the tasty morsels and begged for more!

When Salim realised that there was nothing he could do to make Majnun see reason, and that even the choicest of delicacies would only be thrown to the beasts, he said, 'OK, so you will not eat. So be it. But tell me, what is it that sustains you? You are but a human like me, and a human needs food. Tell me, what is your food?'

Majnun replied, 'Dear Uncle, your name, Salim, means "sound and healthy", which is an exact description of my heart! I am fit and well, even if my mouth and my stomach have forgotten how to eat. The truth is that I no longer desire food: a few roots and berries are all that I need.

'But enough of my needs! I am not the only creature here, and as you can see, my animals are only too glad to accept the food you have brought with you. Watching them eat helps to fill me, too!'

Salim pondered his nephew's words for a while, then smiled. He said, 'Perhaps you are right. After all, birds are caught in snares because they are greedy for bait; are human beings any different? Our hunger is the snare in which Fate entraps us: the greater the greed, the greater the danger.

'Only those who are content with little, as you are, can claim to be truly free; only they are masters of their own worlds. That reminds me of a story which you must hear. It concerns a King and a dervish ...

'There was once a dervish, a "fool of God", who had turned away from the world in order to focus all of his thoughts and desires on the world to come. His home was but a hovel, a miserable pit with crumbling walls, but to him it was grander than a palace.

'One day, the King happened to be riding by. He saw the hovel and could hardly believe that any human would want to live in such a God-forsaken place. He asked one of his courtiers, "What does this man do here? What does he eat? Where does he sleep? Who is he?"

' "He is a dervish," answered the courtier, "a fool of God who requires neither food nor sleep, for he is not as other men."

'The King's curiosity was aroused and so he decided to approach the hermit. At some distance from the hovel, he dismounted from his steed and gestured

to one of his courtiers to bring the hermit out to meet him.

'The courtier went to the door of the hovel, whereupon the hermit emerged, dust-streaked and dishevelled.

' "You seem,' said the courtier, "to have severed all bonds with this world. It would appear also that you are content to live all alone in this God-forsaken pit. For Heaven's sake, why? Where do you find the strength to endure such a hell? And what, pray tell us, do you eat?"

'The dervish held up some plants he had just gathered from the plain where the gazelles graze. He pointed to them and said, "This is what I eat, and I must say that it is more than enough for my needs."

'The courtier, shallow and supercilious as only those who serve Kings can be, sneered contemptuously and said, "How can you bear to live like this? If you were to enter the service of our King you would have better food than a few blades of grass!"

' "Pardon me?" said the dervish indignantly. "Did I hear you call this grass? I will have you know, good sir, that these are honey blossoms! If only you knew how delicious they were, you would resign your post with the King immediately and rush to my table to share them with me!"

'The King heard these words, pondered them a little and, being a wise man, realized the truth in them. He rushed forward to the dervish, grasped his filthy hand and began to shower it with kisses.

'And the King was right to do so, for he had

realised the truth. He had realised that only those are free who have no worldly desires.'

Chapter 43

Majnun listened with rapt attention to Salim's story. When his uncle had finished, Majnun appeared almost joyful. He even laughed as he used to, jumping up and down with restless joy, speaking animatedly and with great fondness about the friends of his youth and the adventures they had shared.

But then his thoughts turned to his mother and his face clouded over. With tears in his voice he said, 'Why is it that I have not thought of my dear mother for so long? My poor mother, the bird with the broken wings! Tell me, how is she? Is she well or has sorrow brought her to her knees? I am her Moorish slave, my face blackened with shame. Indeed, so great is my shame that I dare not approach her, yet how I wish to see her beautiful face once more!'

Salim decided that he would try to make Majnun's

wish come true; after all, perhaps the mother could persuade her wayward son to return to his home and the protection of his tribe. Although Majnun lived like a wild beast, he was human — and do humans not belong with other humans? 'Rest assured that I will bring your mother to you,' said Salim as he left. And he was true to his word, for after a few days he returned, bringing Majnun's mother with him.

It did not take long for the old woman to recognise her son, but when she did her heart sank. How the young rose had withered, how black the shining mirror of youth had become! As she rushed to him, the wild beasts around him began to snarl and growl, but she was not afraid of wild beasts. What concern were they of hers? Her only thoughts were for her child, her poor unhappy son, and so she fell upon him, sobbing and sighing, caressing his cheeks and his hair with her frail, bony fingers. With the unconditional love that only mothers can give, she drew a veil over the past and the injustices she had suffered at his hands: she was there for him in his hour of need, without question, without demand, bound to him by the ties of tenderness and affection that existed between them.

With a flood of tears she washed his poor face, a face so familiar yet so wasted; from the folds of her gown she took a comb and tamed the wilderness of his tangled hair, as though he were a small child again. Whispering in his ear and caressing his cheeks, she dressed the wounds caused by stones and thorns. Slowly, the wild creature began to resemble once more her beloved Kais, the happy child she had once known,

her most treasured jewel, her son. Wiping away her tears, she began to speak:

'My darling Son, what am I to do with you? Is life for you nothing but one long game of love? Your father has been cut down by the sword of death, a sword which hangs over me, too, yet still you choose to intoxicate yourself with the wine of youthful pleasures! How much longer is this to last? Your poor father died of grief and I am set to follow him to the grave by the same route, believe me. Will you not come to your senses? For the love of God, come home with me and put an end to this tragedy. Take a lesson from the birds and beasts of the wilderness: when night falls, do they not return to their nests, their lairs? Are they not an example for you? For how long do you intend to keep yourself apart from the world of men? For how long will you roam the wilds with neither sleep nor peace?

'Life is but a tale and a cry; in a few days it is over. Come back now while you can and give yourself some peace, I beg you! Why should a filthy cave be your home? Why should you live among snakes and vultures? Do you imagine that they care more for you than we do? The snake will bite you and then, when you are dead, the vulture will pick at your bones. So leave them and return with me; stop torturing your poor soul. The soul is not a rock that can withstand the full force of the elements; the heart is no rock either, and you are not made of stone. Allow your soul some rest and your heart some peace. Come back with me!'

His mother's words stung him like a swarm of bees, but Majnun was adamant. Here he was, and here he

would stay. He took his mother's hand in his and addressed her gently:

'My dearest heart, I have become like a pearl that tortures the oyster; this I realise only too well, yet I see no other course open to me. But am I to blame, given that I had no choice in the matter? My situation is desperate, but I have not embraced such a fate willingly. We struggle and strive, but to what end? Each must play out the part written for him. You should know that I have never been free to accept my love or to refuse it: suffering and misery were not for me to choose or reject. Thus, I must beg you not to insist that I return. You say that my soul is a bird that must be freed from its cage. But, Mother, do you not see that the cage itself is my love? How then could I succeed? And if I were to return home with you, I would be giving myself up to another trap, for what you call "home" is to me a prison — a prison in which I would surely die. My love is my home; in any other abode I am a stranger. So leave me, dear heart, and do not insist. I know how unhappy you are because of my suffering. I know that only too well, but it is something that cannot be helped. The only thing I can do is to ask your forgiveness.'

Throwing himself to the ground, Majnun kissed his mother's feet and begged her to forgive him. There was nothing the old woman could say or do; weeping bitter tears, she bade her child farewell and returned home with her brother, Salim.

Time passed, but separation did not become any easier for the old woman to bear. Gradually, she became

a stranger in her own home; to her, it had become the very prison of which her beloved Majnun had spoken. Her desire for life grew weaker until, one night, her soul slipped through the prison bars of earthly existence and flew up and away to join her husband in the other world.

Chapter 44

Once more the royal rider, the sun, galloped into the vast arena where the wheel of heaven turns. His silver-robed rivals, the stars, went pale and beat a hasty retreat to the west. The conqueror's shining countenance was too much for the crystal goblet of night, which trembled until it smashed, spilling its wine and turning the heavens purple from horizon to horizon. Thus came the dawn and the birth of a new day.

Majnun was sitting alone, far from the company of other men, beating out ode after ode on the drum of his loneliness. To him, it mattered little whether it was day or night: a man in his state does not record the passing of time. He was a stranger to the events that pass in the world of men; he would not have known that his mother had left this earth had his uncle, who had come to bring him food and a change of clothes, not given him the news.

Salim held his nephew by the shoulders and spoke gently, saying, 'Your mother suffered much unhappiness while she was alive and now she has departed. Prepared for death, she has said farewell to this house of misery and has gone to a better place. You were not with her when she left, but her thoughts were with you. On her deathbed she longed for you as your father did before her.'

Majnun took an invisible blow to the stomach and held his breath. Then, distress welling in his heart, he clawed at his face with his jagged nails. Screaming like a banshee he jumped up and rushed to the place where his mother lay buried next to his father. There, he buried his face in the earth where they both lay waiting to be questioned by the angels on the Day of Judgement. His cries reached the heavens, his tears were enough to flood the desert and make it bloom, but he knew what we all know: no cries, no tears can bring back what God has taken. Those who heard his laments could hardly bear to listen. His family and the men from his tribe came rushing to his side. Seeing him there, broken by despair, their hearts went out to him. 'Accept our commiserations,' they said. "Your grief is our grief, and our home is your home. Come back and stay with us, for this is where you belong. Stay with us, do not leave again!'

Majnun could reply only with a whimper. With a tiny voice, he thanked them for their hospitality but refused their offer, adding that he was but a guest here. Nothing, no one could hold him now. This was no longer his home; his family and friends were now

strangers. He bade them farewell and made his way back to the mountains where his real friends, his animals, awaited him: only in the mountains was there space enough for his heavy heart to suffer; only there were the horizons wide enough to contain the extent of his pain. For one shining moment he had descended on the world of men like a flash of lightning but now he must return, a storm cloud driven on by the desert wind.

And what is human life, if not a flash of lightning in the dark? It is as nothing: even it were to last a thousand years, compared with eternity it is but the twinkling of an eye. From the outset, life bears death's seal: life and death are entwined like lovers, closer in nature than twins born joined at birth. O man, for how long will you pull the wool over your own eyes? For how long will you refuse to see things as they really are? Each grain of sand judges itself by its own criteria, taking its own length and breadth as the only measure of the world; yet next to the mountain it is nothing. You are but a grain of sand, a prisoner in a world of illusions. You must smash through the bars of your cage and break free! You must free yourself from yourself, and from the rest of mankind! You must learn that what you took for reality is not real at all, and that reality is something else entirely! Follow this writer's example: be like a candle and burn your own treasures — only then will the world, which is now your ruler, become your slave.

Chapter 45

Majnun's letter did not ease Layla's heartache; indeed, it served only to increase her sadness and prolong her suffering. Majnun did not want this; his only intention was to torture himself with his bitter lamentations and sorrowful reproaches. In his heart of hearts, however, he knew the truth, and at the end of his letter he admitted as much. He asked Layla to forgive him, saying that although he had suspected her, he knew deep down that no one had conquered her fortress ...

Layla, for her part, understood only too well how her beloved was thinking. She did not feel hurt by his suspicions; she felt hurt only because he had hurt himself so deeply.

She was also hurt by envy, for it was true, she envied him his freedom. He in his desert wilderness

could be as wild and as free as he wished, while she was a prisoner. She had been a prisoner for as long as she could remember: first of her father, now of her husband.

True, she had been loved, spoiled, wooed and courted — but she remained a prisoner nonetheless. Her husband complied with her request that she should never be touched by him, yet he nurtured hopes of being able to wear down her resistance and win her with his tenderness, enclosing her for ever in the walled citadel of his love. And so he waited, guarding jealously the one gate that he had been forbidden to enter. And Layla waited, too ...

Until one dark, moonless night — a night that Layla sensed was no ordinary night — the guard outside her tent fell into a deep sleep and she was able to escape! But where could she go? Following a voice in her heart, she moved through the darkness until she found herself at the edge of a palm grove where two paths met — the very same spot, in fact, where she had once given the old horseman a letter to take to Majnun. 'Who knows?' whispered the voice in her heart, 'maybe your prayers will be answered and you will receive word from him again here.'

And that indeed is what came to pass. As soon as she reached the crossroads she saw a figure in the darkness ahead of her, a figure whose steps, like hers, seemed to have been guided there by some strange power of the heart. She knew almost immediately that it was the old man. But who was he? Could it be that this was Khidr, God's messenger himself? Little did she care, for she had known in her heart that she

would meet him here; his true identity did not matter in the least.

Unhesitatingly, she stepped forward and said, 'What news do you bring from heaven, old man? What does my wild love do, out there in his desert wilderness? Around whom do his dreams revolve? And what does he say?'

The old man did not seem surprised to see her, nor was he taken aback by her words. Softly, and with great tenderness, he replied, 'Without the radiance of your moon-like beauty, the one about whom you enquire is like the young Joseph at the bottom of the well. His soul is like the ocean in the middle of a winter's night, whipped up by a thousand storms under a moonless sky. Like some herald possessed, he roams the mountainside, screaming and shouting.

'And there is but one word on his lips, and that is "Layla". Layla is all he seeks. And so lost is he in this search that he no longer knows himself. He is on the road to nowhere, for there is no goal left but Layla.'

When Layla heard this, her eyes brimmed with tears and she became like a reed that sounds the plaintive melody of love unrequited. She said, 'The blame is all mine: I am the one who has set fire to my lover's heart and reduced his whole being to ashes! How I wish that I could be with him in his time of trouble! Yet we suffer in different ways. I am the one who is trapped like Joseph in the well; Majnun is free, free to wander the mountains while I am held captive in the valley! I must see him; I will see him!"

Taking the jewels from her ear-rings, she kissed

them and handed them to the old man, saying, 'These are for you, as a reward for your troubles. Now, go to Majnun and bring him here. I want only to see him, to look upon his face for a little while, to bathe in the light of his countenance for but a moment!

'How else can I know how things are with him? How else can I know whether he is still loyal to me? Who knows, perhaps he will recite a few verses for me, verses that no one else has heard before. Perhaps if I listen to his verses, the magic of his words will unravel the knot of longing in my soul.'

The old man tied her jewels into his sash and, kissing the tears from her eyes, bade Layla farewell. Then he rode off into the night, Layla's hopes and fears riding invisible alongside him.

From oasis to oasis he rode, asking and searching, but there was no one to point him to Majnun. Fate alone was to be his guide. Finally, he found the wild recluse at the foot of a mountain, surrounded by savage beasts, his face as sorrowful as that of a jeweller whose stock has been stolen by thieves.

As soon as he saw the old man, Majnun jumped up and went forward to greet him, ordering his snarling beasts not to attack. The old man dismounted and they embraced; Majnun looked as though he had been given the earth, so happy was he to see such a welcome guest. The old man prostrated himself with the deference due to a shah or sultan, invoked God's blessings on Majnun and began to speak:

'You are the King of love, Majnun, and may your reign endure as long as love itself! I have been sent here

by Layla, whose beauty is the eighth wonder of the world. She values the love you share more than she values her own life. And since much time has passed since she last saw your face or heard your voice, she wishes to see you, to meet your eyes with her own, if only for a moment.

'Would it not also make you happy to see her again? Could you not bring yourself to break your vows of separation from the world to look upon her tearful face, just for a second? To whisper some sweet verses that would still the stormy ocean of her young heart, to relive what has become just a memory, to reawaken that which has become part of the past?

'Do not worry, no one will see you. I know of a garden where there are thick palm trees that will protect you both from prying eyes. There will be nothing above you but the indigo dome of the heavens, nothing beneath your feet but a carpet of emerald green. Come, come quickly, for spring awaits you there; spring, and the key to Fate's talisman ...'

The old man opened his bag, took out a cloak and gave it to Majnun to wear. Majnun stood there, dumbfounded by what he had heard. Would it really be possible to catch a glimpse of paradise while still on earth? Would it really be possible to taste eternal bliss while still in the realm of time?

'Little does this old man understand me,' thought Majnun. 'Little does anyone understand me, Majnun the "madman"! Do they not realise that their idea of happiness is not mine? Do they not see that while it may be possible for them to have their wishes granted

in this life, my longing is something else entirely, something that cannot possibly be fulfilled while I remain in this transient world?'

Nevertheless, this was an opportunity that Majnun could not resist, an offer that he could not refuse. How, pray, could he ignore the call of his beloved Layla? And so he let the old man dress him for the journey; then, when they were ready, they set off into the desert, Majnun's caravan of beasts in tow.

The nearer they came to the place where Layla was waiting, the more Majnun shivered with delight and trembled with desire. Impatiently, he goaded his mount to move faster.

It was as though the well-spring of the water of life itself was tempting him from the horizon; it was as though the wind was wafting the scent of his beloved under his nose to spur him on; it was as though he was dying of thirst while the Tigris itself shimmered in the distance, ever receding from his grasp. Majnun wondered whether Fate would be kind to them, just this once ...

Eventually, Majnun and his guide reached the palm grove where his animals were to camp and await their master's return. As dusk fell, Majnun went into the garden and sat down under a palm tree to wait, while the old man left to give the pre-arranged signal to Layla.

Layla, alone in her tent, saw the old man approach and, donning her veil, rushed out to meet him. Her heart was torn between fear, doubt and hope: she had waited so long, cried so many tears — she knew exactly what

she was risking by seeing Majnun like this, but see him she must. Protected by her veil and the falling dusk, Layla acknowledged the old man with a nod and flew past him into the garden.

She saw him straight away, but she stopped before she reached the palm tree beneath which he was sitting. Her whole body was trembling and it was as though she was rooted to the spot. No more than twenty paces separated her from her beloved, but it was as though a sorceror had drawn a magic circle whose bounds she must not overstep.

The old man, who had by now caught up with her, took her by the arm as though to lead her forward. She said courteously, 'Noble sir, this far, but no further. Even now I am like a burning candle; one step closer to the fire and I shall be consumed completely. For proximity brings disaster; for lovers there is safety only in separation.

'Nearness is bliss, that is true, but it is a honey that conceals poison. Why should I ask for more? Even Majnun, the King of love, does not ask for more. Go to him! Go to him and ask him to recite some of his verses to me. Let him sing of love; I shall be all ears. Let him be the cup-bearer; I shall drink of his wine.'

The old man obeyed, but when he approached the quiet figure under the palm tree he saw that Majnun's face was totally drained of colour, his eyes glassy and staring, tears streaming down his cheeks.

The old man took Majnun in his arms and stroked his face until he was himself again. Then he pulled him to his feet, brushed his hair out of his eyes and pointed

in Layla's direction. As soon as their eyes met, Majnun felt life course back through his veins. Then, without thinking, he opened his mouth and the verses Layla had asked for began to flow from his lips.

Chapter 46

He sang:

Whenever the garden is gay with red roses
How fitly we match them with ruby-red wine:
For whom does the rose tear its garment,
I wonder —
From love of the sweetheart, insane
I tear mine!
Do not wretched victims cry out at injustice?
Why rumbles the thunder — the victim am I!
Like raindrops that fall on the jasmine
at sunrise
The cheek of the sweetheart, the tears that I cry.
With tulips aflame all the plain is a ruby —
What robber has been to the gem-mine
to plunder?

The trees scatter musk in such fragrant profusion
That musk of Khotan is left breathless in wonder.

Layla listened in awe as Majnun continued to recite poem after poem. Suddenly, he fell silent. Then, with a cry, he jumped up and fled out of the garden and into the desert like a shadow. True, Majnun was intoxicated with the scent of the wine, but he knew that such wine may be tasted only in paradise.

Chapter 47

By this time the merchants and their caravans had returned, bringing Majnun's verses with them from the deserts and into the streets and markets of the town. Now in Baghdad, on the banks of the Tigris, there lived a youth known as Salam, a young man of considerable beauty and intelligence who had known the pains of unrequited love.

Understandably his love of poetry was great, and as soon as he heard of Majnun and his love-songs for Layla, his imagination was captured.

'I must find this Majnun, this "madman",' he thought. 'Wherever he is, I must find him and talk to him, for he too has suffered in love and can understand my plight.' And so he packed a bag, mounted a camel and rode off into Bedouin country without further ado.

For days he roamed the desert wastes, asking and searching, until eventually he came upon a poor wretch, naked from head to foot, whom he took instantly to be the very Majnun he was looking for. When Majnun saw Salam approaching, he knew that the youth must have spent many days trying to find him and so he held back his beasts and prevented them from attacking him.

Then he greeted the youth politely and helped him dismount. 'Where have you come from, young man?' said Majnun.

'Where I have come from is of little import,' replied the youth. 'It is where I am now that matters. And I am glad to say that I am at my journey's end: I have reached my goal!'

He took Majnun's hand in his and continued, 'My home, if you must know, is Baghdad, and I have come to this strange land for your sake, and for your sake alone. I have come to look upon your wondrous face and to listen to your miraculous verses.

'Now that God has preserved my life thus far, allow me to stay with you for a while. You are a man of great wisdom and enlightenment, and I am the slave come to kiss the dust beneath your feet and obey your every command.

'Every verse you recite I will commit to memory: my heart will be a goblet for the wine of your sweet words, a treasure chest for the jewels of your wisdom!

'Let me stay and serve you, I beg you. Look on me as just another of these dumb beasts, here to guard you

faithfully and never leave your side. What harm could one more animal do? I am one of those crushed by the millstone of love, as you are; do not reject me.'

Chapter 48

When Majnun had listened to what the stranger had to say, his lips split into a smile and he replied, 'My dear, most noble sir! The path you have taken is beset by untold dangers and you would do better to return as quickly as possible. There is no place for you here with me, for you have experienced none of my sufferings, you have tasted none of my woes.

'I have nothing in life but these few wild beasts; since I have no secure foothold, how could I provide you with one? How could I live in harmony with you when I am unable to live with myself? Even the devil and his minions flee from me; why, then, do you think that you would be able to endure my company for even a second? You search for the warmth and

companionship of another human being, but I am a wild and lonely savage who can give you nothing.

'Return to your people for there is nothing here for you. We are like chalk and cheese, we do not agree on anything. Our paths are different and will never converge: you are your own best friend, I am my own worst enemy. You have found someone who has become a stranger not only to the world but also to his own soul. Say, "May God be with you!" and leave him as you found him.

'Please, retrace your steps and go home. Take my advice, now that you have come so far, and go without further question. For if you do not go of your own accord, you will eventually be forced to flee, damaged in mind, body and soul, whether you want to or not.'

Salam of Baghdad heard Majnun out, but the madman's words did not still the stormy ocean of desire in his heart. 'I beg you, for the sake of God,' he cried, 'do not push me away! Do not forbid me to quench my thirst at your well. Consider me a pilgrim who has come here to worship at the Mecca of your being. Would you refuse a pilgrim the right to pray?'

Such were the youth's entreaties that Majnun, much to his regret, had no choice but to give in. Salam was overjoyed. He unpacked his bags, spread a cloth on the ground and covered it with delicacies: sweetmeats, pastries, dried fruits and all manner of tempting foods.

Then he said, 'Now you must be my guest, as I am yours! Please break bread with me and share my food. You may have vowed to fast, but in the end man must eat to keep up his strength. So sit with me and eat, I beg you!'

Majnun shook his head. 'I am one of those,' he said, 'who has conquered all hunger and killed off all base desires. Sweetmeats and pastries exist to sustain those who look after their own well-being; I have no such considerations. Fasting is my food; as such, how can it harm me?'

Salam did not pay much mind to Majnun's words. Instead, mindful that he should always encourage those who have lost heart, he said, 'Maybe it would be better if you didn't feed the despair that has made its home in your heart, for given half a chance it will consume your whole being. Look at the sky! Even the sky does not remain the same: one day blue, one day grey, one day sunny, one day filled with rain. The sky is always changing its appearance, constantly revealing to us new pages of Fate's book.

'The world has ever been thus. In the space of a single moment, in the twinkling of an eye, a hundred locked doors may be opened and sorrow transformed to joy. Do not nurture and sustain your grief so: let it go and turn your back on it. It is better to laugh than to cry, even if your heart is breaking. My heart was broken once, and my body paralysed with grief.

'But God in His compassion took pity on me and showed me the way out of the pit of misery I had dug for myself. And He will have mercy on you, too, if you turn to Him. Your sorrows will be lifted and you will forget your grief. The flame of love that set fire to your whole being is nothing but the flame of youth; when the youth becomes a man, the raging fire within him cools. Believe me, for I speak the truth.'

Salam's intention was pure, his advice well meant. But it was hard for Majnun to supress his rage. His voice quivering, he said, 'What do you take me for? Do you think I am some drunkard? Some poor love-sick fool, made senseless by his desires? Do you not realise that I have transcended such a state? I have risen above all that, for I am the very King of Love in all his majesty. My soul is free of lust, my longing is free of all that is base and unseemly, my mind is free of all that is shameful. I have unravelled the knot of desire that once filled my heart, do you not see?

'Love is fire; I am the wood that is reduced to ashes by its flames. Love has razed to the ground the very temple of my being; my soul has gathered together its belongings and moved on. Do you think that it is me that you see here before you?

'No, you are wrong: you imagine that you see me, but in reality I no longer exist. I am gone, and only the beloved remains.

'And do you imagine, even for a second, that the ocean of this love, battered by the storms of grief, could ever be stilled or run dry? Never — until the stars lose their glory or the fires of Hell their heat! Do you really think that this love could be prised away from my heart? Then you are more foolish than I thought! The day that love is prised away from this heart will be the day that you are able to count the grains of sand in this desert!

'And so if you want to talk to me, watch what you say! And if you value your life, you would do better to keep such nonsense to yourself.'

Majnun's words affected Salam deeply. Had he not been told by his elders to beware of thoughtless speech? Had he not been advised not to shoot an arrow before testing the bow? Words leave a man's lips even faster than arrows leave the bow, but shame and regret remain. Salam began to wish that he had never opened his mouth.

Salam and Majnun were destined to tread the same path but for a short time. For a while, the youth from Baghdad accepted desert life and the ways of the wild hermit; indeed, his new life was not without its rewards, for Majnun's verses were like pearls of great beauty, scattered for him to pick up and treasure, to preserve in the casket of his memory.

But soon the hunger and the sleeplessness of life with Majnun began to take their toll. Soon he felt that his health and his sanity would be in danger if he stayed a day longer, and so he left the wild beasts and their master and returned to Baghdad and the land of men. There he recited the madman's verses, amazing all who listened with their wisdom and beauty, and touching them all to the depths of their souls.

Chapter 49

Nothing that happens to us in this life is without meaning, even if that meaning is at times difficult to fathom. Every page of the vast Book of Life, which is as great as the cosmos itself, has two sides: on one side, we commit to writing our plans, our dreams, our aspirations; the other side, the side we cannot see, is filled by Fate, whose decrees rarely accord with our desires.

Who can decipher the cryptic inscriptions of Fate? At first, we are unable to read them; then, when we are able to read them, we are unable to endure them! Our thoughts and hopes, our dreams and aspirations all extend to the future, but often we make mistakes and have to pay when our calculations do not balance. We admire the rose and long to make it our own, only to see our hands ripped by thorns when we stretch to pluck

it. We suffer hunger and thirst and desires unfulfilled, forgetting that to satisfy our desires may be our undoing, and that to go without the things we covet most may be our salvation. The fact is that Fate and human desire are usually at odds: when man is in conflict with what has been written for him in Fate's book, he would do well to acquiesce rather than rebel. For man forgets that what appears to be poison sometimes turns out to be honey.

Take Layla, for instance. To others she was a treasure, to herself a burden. To her husband, Layla was a jewel of unparalleled beauty; to Layla, her husband was a venomous serpent coiled around her. In his eyes, she was the moon in all its splendour; in her eyes, he was the dragon that holds the moon in its putrid jaws. Thus both Layla and her husband suffered, she from him and he from her.

For her husband, the situation was unbearable, but for Layla it was pure torture. Was she not, after all, like a priceless ruby trapped in the heart of a stone? What weapons did she have but patience and deceit? What earthly joy did she have but her love for Majnun, a love that she nurtured in secret, a love that she hid from all eyes, especially those of her husband?

And what of Ibn Salam? Was his situation any better than hers? In the eyes of the world, he possessed the most precious jewel known to man; in reality, however, he possessed nothing. He knew that Layla was not really his, had never been and could never be his. He knew this and he kept it secret from others, however much it pained him. And so he kept watch

over a treasure that he was not allowed to enjoy, even though to all appearances it was his for the taking.

The wounds of unrequited love sting and smart, but Ibn Salam's feelings for Layla were so strong that he was grateful for anything she gave him, even if it was only pain and heartache. And if he could not have her, at least he could keep her: he would be the magician and she the fairy, held captive in his palace, hidden from the eyes of men. If he could not love her and be loved by her, at least she was his to worship for ever.

Did Layla know how he felt? Whenever he approached her, she would hide her tears and feign a smile. Those who saw her did not realise the extent of her grief, but then why should they? When a solitary candle burns, one sees only the light it gives; rarely does one notice that as it gives of itself to others, the candle sheds waxen tears until it is consumed and can shine no more.

But the wheel of heaven turns, and as it turns so the hand of Fate is revealed. Eventually, Ibn Salam lost all hope. Layla would see him rarely, each meeting more painful than the one before. What can a man do when he loves but is not loved in return? The sorrow trapped in his soul had slowly spread, poisoning his whole being. His body was wracked with fever, his breath as hot and dry as the desert wind. Gravely ill, Ibn Salam took to his bed.

A physician was summoned, the most skilled in the land. He took his patient's pulse, tested his blood and his water, and gave him herbs and potions that eventually extinguished the fire. Gradually, Ibn Salam's

strength returned and it seemed for a while that he was out of danger. But as soon as he was able to get up and walk around again, he ignored the doctor's instructions and began to eat and drink those things forbidden him. The fever was unleashed once more and Ibn Salam fell, his body weaker than before.

With the first wave of the flood, the hard earth is softened; with the second wave, it is washed away completely. This time there was nothing the doctor could do to help him. Ibn Salam was still young, and although illness and grief had weakened him almost to the point of death, his robust constitution fought off the fresh attack. For several days, it seemed that he would pull through. But then his breathing became slower and shallower until, on the fourth day, his soul departed his body and danced up and away with the wind, leaving behind this world of sorrows, this vale of tears.

Indeed, whatever we are and whatever we have are given to us on trust: the loan of life is ours but for a short time. There comes a time when we must hand back all that we have been given. Thus man should not cling to that which has been entrusted to him, for his desire to possess is but a rope that binds him to this transient world. To obtain the real jewel, one must burst open the casket and soar up and away from life's crumbling tower.

What of Layla, now that Ibn Salam was dead? True, she had never loved him, that much was certain. But he had been her husband and surely he deserved her pity at least. Pity him she did, but her pity was tempered by a tremendous sense of relief. For too long she had kept

her innermost feelings concealed; now, the chains that had kept her a prisoner for all these years had suddenly fallen away and she was free, like one of the animals that her beloved Majnun had delivered from the hunters' traps. Now she was free to weep to her heart's content, to weep without fear of being questioned or stared at. For now no one could know whom she was mourning! On the surface, of course, her mourning was for Ibn Salam; deep in her heart her tears, as always, were for Majnun, and for him alone.

Yes, she was free, as free as her beloved Majnun, although her freedom was of a different kind. In accordance with the customs of her people, she must now veil her face and see no one: for two whole years she was to keep to her tent, cut off from the world, alone with her grief. This, of course, was exactly what she had wanted; nothing could have been more pleasing to her! To be alone, without fear, to dedicate her heart and her soul and her tears to the only one she had ever loved.

Chapter 50

In the garden, the leaves were falling like tears. The flowers had cast off their many-coloured summer gowns and donned the sombre robes of autumn. The silver of the jasmin had lost its lustre; the rose wept petals as it mourned the passing of summer; the narcissus bade its companions farewell and made ready to depart.

Like sailors afraid of an advancing storm, the fruit trees threw their loads overboard and the gardeners collected apples, grapes and berries to protect them from the coming frosts. The rivers and the lakes gave up their warmth, while the complexion of the countryside surrendered its emerald sheen and became yellow and wan.

As the garden slowly withered, so did Layla: her spring was over, made winter by the freezing finger of

Fate, by the icy touch of life's most trying tribulations. The fire of life had once burned brightly within her; now it was hardly more than a flickering flame, a plaything of the wind, which might be extinguished at any moment. Of the full moon that was once her radiance, only a pale crescent remained; of the stately cypress tree that was her demeanour, only a weak shadow could be seen. Layla was a flower that had lost its freshness and shed its petals; indeed, Layla was Layla no more.

Her limbs were wracked with fever; rashes and blotches marked her face and her arms. Her fatigue was so great that she was unable to leave her bed; it soon became apparent to her that she was not long for this world.

She knew that death was close for she could sense its presence in the room, she could feel its icy breath on her neck. Knowing that the time to depart had come, she allowed no one but her mother to visit her.

Before it was too late, she decided to reveal her secret for the first and last time. She took her mother's hand and said, 'Dearest Mother, my light is fading and soon the candle of my being will be snuffed out. Before the darkness falls and my soul is taken, I must give voice to that which is in my heart.

'Indeed, I have no choice but to unburden myself: grief has smashed open the seal on my lips and I can hold back no longer. The one I love — the man for whom I lived and for whom I now die — is far away and cannot hear me.

'But you can hear me, dear Mother! And since you

can hear me, I beg you to listen well and do what I ask of you.

'When I am dead, dress me in a bridal gown; I shall wear no shroud or winding sheet. Dress me like a bride and make me beautiful.

'To paint my eyes you are to take dust from beneath my lover's feet; instead of indigo you are to use the darkness of his sorrow; instead of rose-water you are to use his tears; and instead of perfume you are to use his grief.

'My bridal gown must be blood-red, the colour of martyrdom. Am I not a martyr to love? Red is the colour of feasting and festivals. Is death not my feast? Is it not my festival? Then, when you have dressed me in red, cover me with a veil of earth — a veil that I shall never take off again.

'And then I shall wait. I shall wait until he comes, for come he shall. That restless wanderer, love's eternal nomad, will find his way to my tomb and there he will sit and beg me to appear. But the veil of earth will never be lifted and he will weep bitter tears. Comfort him, Mother, for he is my true friend. Treat him well and show him compassion, as though he were your own son.

'Do this for the sake of God, and because I have loved him; I have loved him more than life itself, and my wish is that you should love him, too. He is all I have, Mother, and I bequeath him to you for safekeeping.'

Layla gasped for breath, her eyes rolling, beads of sweat forming like pearls on the ivory of her forehead.

But she had not finished yet. Her voice reduced to a breathless whisper, she continued, 'When he comes, you will know him immediately. When he comes, give him this message. Tell him: "When Layla left this world, she left with your name on her lips. Her dying words concerned you and you alone; in death, as in life, she was faithful to no one but you. She has shared your grief in this world and now she has taken it with her as sustenance for her journey.

'Her love for you did not die with her; wherever she is, she still longs for you. True, you cannot penetrate this veil of earth and look upon her eyes, but if you could you would see that they are searching for you still.

'Her eyes speak volumes, each written in your name, each dedicated to your memory." That is the message you must tell him, Mother.'

Layla's lips quivered and, with tears streaming down her cheeks, she called out her beloved's name for the last time. As her voice trailed away, the light in her eyes dimmed and her soul broke free of its bonds.

Layla's mother cradled her dead child in her arms, squeezing her tightly as though to force life back into her body. She pressed her lips to her daughter's pale cheeks and stroked her hair, all the time whispering her name and shedding bitter tears of pain and pity. She would have given the world if only her dear child could have had another few moments ...

But even if she had owned the world, nothing could have brought Layla back to the land of the living. The girl was gone and nothing could be done to bring her

back: death is a realm from which no traveller can return. And as the mother sat there weeping, a soft rain began to fall, as though the heavens themselves were joining in the lament.

Chapter 51

Layla's prediction came true: as soon as Majnun heard of his beloved's death, he rushed to her grave like a thunder cloud driven by a raging storm.

It was a terrible sight, for here was a soul desecrated by grief; here was a heart ravaged by the fire of pain and misery, a fire so fearsome that it had reduced Majnun's very being to a mere cinder. Those who saw him at Layla's graveside were so shocked by his appearance that most of them fled in terror; those who later heard about it from others took pity and wept for him. No one — not even the hardest of hearts — was unmoved by what they saw or heard that day.

At first, he writhed in the dust like some crazed serpent guarding a priceless treasure. Then, as Layla's death began to sink in, he took on the dazed, glassy-

eyed appearance of one in a trance or under some spell. For some time he sat there, unable to speak; presently the flood-gates of emotion opened and a torrent of lament burst forth:

'My darling flower! You withered before you had a chance to bloom. The cruel frosts of misfortune turned your spring to autumn: scarcely had you opened your eyes to look upon the world when they were closed forever.'

The gathering crowd watched dumbfounded as Majnun rocked back and forth on his knees at the foot of Layla's grave like a man possessed.

His words — surely, they thought, the product of some strange delirium — grew louder and wilder with each breath. He continued, 'Tell me, how are things with you down there in the dark? What has become of your beauty now? The mole on your cheek, your doe-like eyes, the fragrant curls of your night-black hair — what has happened to them? Which colours have they dressed you in, my sweet? Whose eyes do you brighten now, and whose minds do you bewitch with the magic of your smile? Which riverbank do you adorn, my flower? Whose bed of thorns have you transformed into a rose-garden? Tell me this: how do you spend your time in the dark, dank cave of death? Do you not realise that where there are caves, there are snakes in abundance? A cave is no place for one such as you, whose beauty outshines the moon! On the other hand, you are one of God's greatest treasures, and a cave is as fitting a place as any in which to conceal that which is most precious. That is it! You are a buried treasure now:

if not, why do you lie deep beneath the earth? What is more, every buried treasure has a serpent to guard it: I am your serpent and I shall guard you until the day I die.

'How changed you are, my love! The cruel hands of Fate had stirred up a storm in your heart, whirling you around until you were dazed and confused, until you desired only release.

'But now the storm has abated and you are at peace, the ocean of your soul more still than the water at the bottom of a deep well. True, you are hidden from my eyes, but my heart can see you and will never lose sight of you! True, you are not here in person, but the pain and suffering you endured in this life will live on for ever.'

Majnun rose to his feet and looked around. The people had gone, terrified by what they took to be the ravings of a madman. But Majnun was not alone. Around him stood his animal companions, supporting him with a mute loyalty that touched his heart. And when, finally, he headed back into the wilderness, his beasts followed him.

The sombre caravan of man and beasts made its way through the desert, with Majnun singing a haunting song as he led the way. As he sang of the only power that can conquer death — the power of love — his plaintive tones echoed through the mountains; it seemed as though the very sands beneath his feet were whispering the same lament. And as he sang, he shed tears of blood that fell to the ground, leaving a crimson trail behind him.

Yet he no longer felt at home in the desert wastes; every now and again, the urge to visit Layla would overcome him and he would hurry back to her grave, his beasts in tow. Like a river in flood he would rush down into the valley where she lay, there to plant tender kisses in the earth that covered her. And throughout his pilgrimage, as he lay in tearful communion with his buried angel, the animals would stand guard and watch over him. His visits to Layla's tomb had no pattern; consequently, her friends and family kept away from the graveyard, afraid that the madman might suddenly appear without warning. Who, they argued, would want to risk being mauled by a crazed lion, or bitten by a rabid dog?

Chapter 52

Rapidly, so rapidly, did he travel towards death, but however fast he moved, it seemed that he would never reach his goal. He was now but a pilgrim in the world, hurrying towards the grave that was his Mecca, his only place of rest along the way a bed of rocks and thorns. The harvest of his time on earth was burnt and lay smouldering, and now the millstone of Fate was crushing his bones and grinding them to dust.

Gradually, he grew weaker until one day he knew that he had reached the very edge. Slowly, for one last time, he dragged himself to Layla's tomb. It was evening when he arrived, the sky deep indigo and studded with stars. The Milky Way looked like a rushing river; soon Majnun's boat would weigh anchor for the last time, and his soul would join that river for

the final journey. He sat down exhausted at the foot of Layla's grave, lifted his face and, raising his hands towards heaven, began to pray:

'O Lord, Creator of all beings! I implore You in Your own Name: relieve me of the burden of life! Set me free and let me go to my beloved! Untie the chains that bind me to this cruel world and let me fly!'

Majnun closed his eyes and lay down on Layla's grave, pressing his body against the earth with all that remained of his strength. His parched lips moved in silent prayer; then, with the words, 'Layla, my love ...' his soul broke free and he was no more.

Chapter 53

Some say that Majnun's body remained on Layla's grave for a month, others say a year. Some of those who had seen him there swore that he had not died but was merely sleeping, for Majnun's beasts sat guarding him, as one watches over a slumbering child. Even they could not believe that he would not rise again.

Afraid of the animals who crowded around the lovers' tomb, the people kept away. From afar they would stare and point, saying, 'The madman is still asleep on his lover's grave.'

And thus in death, as in life, Majnun was left alone; even the vultures that wheeled and swooped above the tomb would not approach him. Eventually, all that remained of him became dust and returned to the earth, leaving nothing but a few scraps of bone. Only then did

the animals abandon their vigil. One by one they sloped off into the wilderness, leaving their master behind them.

Once the animals had gone, the people came. Members of the two families — Layla's tribe and Majnun's tribe — came to stand and weep at the grave where their dear ones lay, united at last in death. A new headstone was made, and on it were inscribed the words:

Two lovers lie sleeping in this tomb,
United at last in death's dark womb.
Faithful in separation, true in love:
One heart, one soul in heaven above.

Dr Colin Turner has a Ph.D in Islamic History from Durham University, where he lectures in Persian and Islamic Studies. He lived in Iran before and during the revolution, and his recent publications include a new English translation of the Koran. He lives in Durham with his wife and three children.

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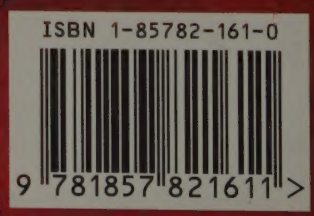
ISBN 1-85782-161-0